THE SIBYL

On a mountain slope above Delphi the Sibyl an old woman lives alone in exile with her imbecile son She is visited one day by a stranger It is the Wandering Jew cursed because he once prevented a criminal carrying his cross on the way to the place of execution from resting his head against the wall of his house Rebellious against God he asks the Sibyl what his fate will be and she answers by recounting her own story She tells of how she saw visions and heard voices and became a priestess of her love for a one-armed soldier his death and her subsequent treatment by the priests and the rioting crowds of the birth of her son in a cave among the goats In spite of her tribulations she cannot hate God and after hearing her story the Jew goes on his way knowing that he too cannot escape or deny his Creator

By the same Author

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BARABBAS

THE DWARF

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Short Stories

THE MARRIAGE FEAST

THE SIBYL

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IN a little house on the mountain slopes above Delphi lived an old woman with her witless son The house consisted of a single room one wall was the mountainside itself and always dripped with moisture It was really not a house at all but a ramshackle hut which herdsmen had built for themselves It stood quite alone away up in the wild mountain high above the buildings of the city and above the sacred precincts of the temple The woman seldom left the house her son never He sat within in the half-light smiling to himself as he had always done he was now well into middle age and his lank hair had begun to turn grey But his face was untouched it was as it had always been without any real features in its beardless downy childishness only that queer perpetual smile The old woman s face was furrowed and austere and swarthy as if it had been touched by fire her eyes had the look of eyes that have seen god.

They lived quite by themselves no one visited them or had anything whatever to do with them Two goats gave them milk and the woman gathered herbs and roots up in the mountain and that was what they had to live on They could never have got anything from other people for no one would have any dealings with them

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Behind her inside in the half light sat her grizzled son a smile on his downy childish face

One evening before sunset a man came walking up the path from Delphi There was nothing strange in this people came that way sometimes to see to their animals at pasture in the mountain The track passed a stone s throw or so below her house But this time something happened which surprised her greatly The man turned off the path and began climbing the steep slope where there was no track at all Such a thing was unknown no one had ever left the path to come up here Who would want to? The slope was covered with loose stones from landslips and at times he found it difficult to advance Perhaps he was unused to this country From her nest she followed him with her old eyes

He came nearer and she was able to make out his face She did not know him But she knew no one—no one now living He was quite a tall man with a strong brownish beard untrimmed and not in the fashion of this country His cheeks were pale quite without colour though he had to exert himself greatly to climb the hill He was a man in the prime of life perhaps in early middle age

When he came up to her he made his salutation but not in the manner of these parts And when having sat

down on the stone bench before the house he began speaking slowly and at first with some difficulty in finding words she noted at once that he was a foreigner and probably from very far away This could be seen also in his look which was heavy and old though he himself was young But that might be his own look and not that of his race

He told her that he had come to Delphi to consult the oracle about something of great importance to him But he had been turned away before he could do so they would not let him enter the room where the seekers were assembling

There was no answer to what he asked they told him No oracle in the world could answer it

Dejectedly he left the temple court and wandered at random about the city all that day More than once he thought of leaving Delphi where he had nothing to hope for and of going further—somewhere—anywhere Then in a dirty alley in the poorest quarter of the town he had got into conversation with an old blind man a very old beggar who crouched at a street corner and held out his shaking hand in the hope that someone would drop something into it This seemed an odd thing in a street where all must have been equally poor but he said that in earlier days he had begged in the temple court and beside the sacred way though now he could no longer go so far When we had begun to talk of this together I told him of my own cares of my long

vain wayfaring to Delphi and of my distress because the oracle had been unable to give me an answer He listened to me with compassion and understood me well though he thought it strange that there should be anything which the Delphic oracle could not answer You must have put hard questions he said

But when he had thought it over he went on reflectively There may be one who can help you One who can answer all that a man can ask And he told me that up in the mountains there lived an old priestess of the oracle an ancient Pythia cursed and hated by all because she had committed a crime against god Against the temple and against god and against all sacred things yet she was a great and mighty sibyl No priestess in Delphi had ever been so great so beloved and possessed by god as she She had prophesied with her mouth wide open and no one had been able to endure the sight of her when she was filled with her god His own breath had issued from her mouth and her speech had been as wild as fiery flames it was said for thus did he love her He refused to speak through anyone but her and did so for many years

But then she had sinned against both god and man and cast herself down into damnation she had been driven from the city with sticks and stones and had been cursed by all men and of course by the god—by him whom she had offended This happened in my childhood said the old man but although no one speaks

of her any more or utters her name she is said to be living still in the mountains whither she was driven And I don t doubt that it is true One who has been in such contact with the divine must find it hard to die with such power as must yet remain within her One in whom god has once taken up his abode he does not forsake though he remain only as a curse

Seek her out and you ll surely get an answer to your questions though it may appal you

And he pointed with his trembling hand to this mountain and blind though he was he pointed aright

She to whom he had been speaking sat motionless as she had sat throughout his tale No change in her face revealed what might be stirring within her Searchingly and with some surprise he gazed into the dark furrowed face as if to read in that old book which for all its plain script was so difficult to decipher It was as if it had been written in an ancient tongue which was no longer spoken.

For a long time she sat silent seemingly abstracted, withdrawn into herself

What was it that you asked the oracle? she said at last, as if she had woken from her musing

I asked about my destiny he said.

Your destiny?

Ay my destiny My life—how it s to be What awaits me.

That s what most people ask that s the t

about What is so extraordinary in your destiny? Is it something special?

Yes it is

And he told her of a peculiar thing that had happened an event which had scored itself so deeply into his memory that he seemed not to recall anything besides an event which left his soul no peace which had impelled him to come to Delphi and now at last to her to seek enlightenment and some measure of peace

I lived happily with my young wife and my little son he began in the city where I was born and I had no thought of leaving I had my livelihood there and a house left me by my father I was not rich but well-to-do my life was secure and carefree and all things seemed to prosper with me

One day as I was standing at my door I saw an unknown man dragging himself along with his cross There was nothing extraordinary in this nothing unusual it often happened that men who were to be crucified were led along our street by soldiers up to the gallows place ours was the road to it And there was nothing peculiar about the man himself so far as I could see He was pale and tired he seemed exhausted Because of that no doubt he paused and leaned against the wall of my house a little way from where I was standing I didn t like it What s he doing that for I thought If a condemned man a man so unhappy leans against my house he may bring ill fortune upon it

So I told him to move on and said I didn t want him there

Then he turned towards me and when I saw his face I knew that this was no ordinary man—that there must be something special about him But what it was that made me think so I could not have said I believe that the look on his face was not usually angry at all but gentle and submissive But it was not so now it was mighty and terrible in a way that I shall never forget

Because I may not lean my head against your house your soul shall be unblest for ever he said

I was astonished and uneasy and thought it somehow sinister The soldiers simply laughed and drove him forward for they did not want him to stand there either they forced him on But before he went further with his cross he turned to me again and said menacingly

Because you denied me this you shall suffer greater punishment than mine you shall never die You shall wander through this world to all eternity and find no rest

And he settled his cross upon his shoulder again and dragged himself on along the street until he disappeared through the gate of the city some way off

I stayed where I was with a most strange sensation. Something seemed to have happened to me—something whose inward meaning escaped me I could not explain it either to myself or to anyone else but so it was Some

neighbours who had heard what the man said and saw me standing there and looking queer told me not to trouble myself about it—not to take any notice of what a man like that said a criminal who was going to be crucified Surely I knew that they often burst out into the most terrible threats and curses because they were in a rage with everything and because they were to lose their lives They talk all sorts of rubbish you know that —*it s nothing to vex yourself about*

I knew well enough that they were right And in taking it as they did—in laughing at me a little and shrugging their shoulders at the incident they reassured me When we had chatted about it a little I was laughing at it too I went back to my work and thought no more about it

But I couldn t quite forget It came into my mind now and then though I tried to drive it out The day passed I attended to my work and everything was as usual Or so I thought But the words he had spoken remained with me from time to time they were repeated in my innermost self—by whom? By me? I don t know but I heard them—I heard them quite plainly I couldn t understand why I had to recall them I knew they meant nothing—nothing at all—that they were just words spoken to me by an unknown criminal because he had not been allowed to lean his head against my house There was no more to it than that and it was foolish to pay any attention to what he d said Why did I do it?

I thought that by next day I should have shaken it off But when I woke in the morning it was with the sense of something having happened to me and as I lay dozing the same words were slowly repeated inside me and softly—as it were in a whisper—they reminded me of the sentence that had been passed on me—by whom?

When I had risen I was myself again and I set about my work as usual But I felt no real inclination for it—I who was usually so eager and took such pleasure in it After a time I became too restless to sit still and I wandered idly about doing nothing at all I had no wish to do anything This was quite unlike my usual self And so it went on day after day In some way I had altered and could not recognise myself

I don t know how long it was before I heard the queer rumour that the man who had been taken along our street to be crucified was god s son It was not said openly but whispered among people in the city and talked about in secret Those who ought really to have known the truth of it—those who believed in him—seemed to be in hiding and dared not come forth to bear witness on his behalf—not yet There cannot have been many of them most people in the city didn t believe it at all of course they thought it was some foolish invention and those who had had him executed declared it to be a blasphemy against god

God s son—of course he wasn t I told myself It s ridiculous Quite absurd God s son? And I asked

about this rumour about how it had begun and who were spreading it naturally it was those who believed those who were in hiding They declared that a miracle had come to pass—all kinds of miracles—showing that it was true and then the miracle of their own belief that they knew him to be the son of god and had experienced it in themselves For them this was of course the greatest most important miracle They were not at all reliable people and what they said was unworthy of attention

I discussed it with the neighbours asking them their opinion asking what they thought of the story that the criminal—if they remembered him—who had dragged himself past with his cross was god s son They had heard of it too and thought it arrant nonsense

But many believed it I said They shrugged their shoulders and said something about lunatics

Are you still brooding over what he said to you? one of them added with a laugh

Not in the least I answered laughing too Are you mad? You don t think I d care about a thing like that?

But was that true? Did I really not care about it? It was easy enough to say but why then did I feel so changed so downcast and joyless and why did everything seem so meaningless? Why had it become so? Why did everything seem somehow so empty and desolate both within and around me? I had never felt

thus before. What sort of change was it? Why did I feel like this?

I remember one day I was walking outside the city gate in the fertile countryside I knew so well the vineyards and the fields of grain, with olives and fig trees in them I marvelled to see how drab and depressing it all looked for as a rule it was quite the opposite It was the middle of the day but it felt more like evening and I was oddly oppressed by the sight of that landscape and its grey desolation What did it mean? What was the matter with me?

Was this my world? The world I was to live in?

And I remember with how heavy a tread I turned back to the city and my home

As yet I had said nothing to my wife I had not wanted to But she must have noticed it Mustn t she? So I went into the room where she usually was at that time of day to tell her about it and what it was like

I found her lying on a straw mat on the floor playing with her child I broke in upon their game I explained to her as best I could what was the matter with me and that I believed I had been laid under a curse

She laughed at me as she lay there on her back playing with the baby and holding it high in the air he had such a young and lovely laugh.

Yes I think you must have been she said seeing how long it is since you kissed me.

I tried to smile and stood watching them knowing

that this was something beautiful and something that I dearly loved yet a sort of grey ash seemed to lie upon them as it lay upon all I saw

And I felt like a stranger standing there like some outsider who ought not to disturb them in their life When I went away I heard them go on with their play

As they were so had I been but lately—delighting in life in being alive I had rejoiced in it every day

Every day? It was strange he had said that I should live for ever—that I should never die How strange Why should I mind that? Had it not always been my dearest wish never to have to die never to die? Why then did I not rejoice? Why did I feel no gladness?

To all eternity and find no rest

I had never really thought about it before but now I seemed to gain some inkling of what eternity was That it would deprive me of my life That it was itself the damnation the unblessedness that it would itself unhallow my soul

Eternity It has nothing to do with life I thought it is the contrary to all life It is something limitless endless a realm of death which the living must look into with horror Was it here that I was to dwell? Was it for that that this thing had been given me? To all eternity That was my death sentence the most cruel that could be devised

This god takes from me all the joy of living I whispered to myself

For the first time I glimpsed the existence that awaited me and looked into its void And for the first time I truly believed in the power of this curse—I believed that this questionable god could carry out his intention and that my soul would become just as he had threatened that all would be accomplished as he had said

Yes all was being accomplished The change in me went forward and I was helpless to arrest it What power had I? What was I to do? How could I act how prevent what was happening? I had no power I was utterly impotent For I was myself the unhallowed soul I desired to help I was myself the transformation that was taking place within me and filling me with perdition.

One day in my despair I did something—something that was only to increase my unhappiness my unblessedness It was the middle of the day but I lay outstretched upon my bed tormented by my hurrying thoughts by my inner self my own inner self—the thing that was no longer mine Suddenly I was seized with fury at my destiny and the malignant god to whom I owed it W should I accept it? This madness? W not reb against the power within me and ot! I not! I will live I will live exactly be as I have been I will be like live!

And when I had said it to myself—it was as if the om garment I felt a relief

known before durng all the tme that had passed And I rose and went into the room in which my wife and the child were For a while I stood watching their prattling play then I went up and gently separated her from the child and kissed her She put her arms about me and they were bare and warm and we went into my room together and when we had undressed she lay down on my bed with the little smile I knew so well—on the bed where but now I had lain in torment—and parted her knees for me to come at her All was as before when we had loved each other and I thought I had conquered and regained my happiness

But I could do nothing I felt how ravishing she was more ravishing than ever—I knew that—because it had been so long yet I was not filled with any desire Her warmth flooded to meet me but it was she alone who was warm I grew cold and damp and could do nothing Her breath panted against my face panted for me But I was powerless

At last I burst out weeping—I lay despairing on her glorious warm body and wept

She stroked my hair a little and my cheek Then she took my head between her hands and looked at me looked closely searchingly at me into my face as she had not done for a long time

How old your eyes have grown she said

Now my unhappiness was complete it was like a bottomless well into which I had been hurled now that

thus too had been taken from me But was it so strange? It was life s greatest bliss Was it strange that it should be taken from me that I should not know it—never know it again? I the unblessed? I condemned to eternal unblessedness?

After this others too began to notice the change in me or so at least I fancied People avoided me withdrew from me I thought and if they were compelled to speak to me and meet my eyes they looked at me queerly The neighbours in our street fell silent and seemed to realise at last that something had happened to me and that it had to do with the man who was taken out to be crucified and whom I forbade to lean his head against my house They never spoke to me about it and as I say they avoided me yet it was clear that they had noticed the alteration in me—that they observed me secretly and whispered about me and that it was from compassion alone that they refrained from saying How old your eyes have grown

My wife became more and more shy of me something in me seemed to frighten her—no doubt my eyes And she must have remembered my telling her that a curse had been laid upon me I don t know for we never talked of it and what had happened between us we never hinted at by so much as a word

She doesn t want to look into them any more I told myself

No doubt she suffered as keenly as I did from the

change I had undergone I don t know for we never confided in each other neither of us knew what burden of thought the other bore And after the time I ve spoken of our eyes never met again

I had never concerned myself about her thoughts in any case She was like a child and I had never gained much by talking to her though this had not struck me before and I had been content with her childish prattling Now I understood the futility of talking to her about anything and I did so no longer Her mere presence began to exasperate me and the knowledge that she was somewhere near—even the sound of her voice or her laughter somewhere about the house But she didn t laugh so often now For the most part she stayed with the child I suppose they still played together in there but more quietly than before they could hardly be heard Thus everything in the house was greatly changed

I was bound to bear rancour against her because I had been unable to go into her I had to take revenge upon her for that I did so now I never looked at her neither at her nor at the child but behaved as if they weren t there I had never been particularly attached to my son in any case—or had I? At least I had always thought that she fussed over him too much no doubt because she was a child herself and the secret grudge I had borne against him broke out now that I was cut off from her for ever What troubled her more than anything I

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played together and from which one could always hear their laughter (though not lately)—when I went in there again and realised at last that they were not there and never would be there again I sank down with a shriek For it was as if a knife had been driven into my breast and I lay bleeding on that little mat of straw where once she had lain on her back and lifted up her child with her bare arms How long I lay there I cannot tell But then I heard something more and more distinctly a voice inside me and I had to sit up I sat staring before me Over and over again louder and louder I heard it—heard what he had said—the frightful words that he had pronounced over me My inner self was full of them echoed with them it was as empty as a deserted house and between the bare walls there reverberated eerily those menacing words about my destiny—about what lay before me His curse resounded through my soul

That same evening unknown to any I left the city of my birth and walked out into the darkness to begin my wandering through the ages In the loneliness of night I took the first steps along the road of my malediction

Since then I have roamed without a halt without rest as I am bound to do and like him finding nowhere to lay my head I have wandered about a world covered with ashes with a layer of grey ashes the world that is mine I have seen in it all human wretchedness all want

and evil I have learnt that it is like me as evil and loveless as I who am to live in it for ever that this is my world the world of the homeless god-accursed man with a soul for ever unblessed

From time to time I have come upon those who believe in the man who condemned me to this life It has happened more and more often for it seems that his teaching has spread far and wide These people seem happy whether from simple-mindedness or some other cause—perhaps because of their faith that is what they say themselves of course And it may be true To them he seems to have brought blessing that same god who to me has brought so great a curse And they say he is good and loving—ay that he is love itself for the man who believes in him and devotes himself to him It may be so It does not concern me For me he is a malignant power which never releases me from its talons and gives me no peace

That he really is god—that the man who was led along our street past my house to be crucified really was god s son—they do not doubt. They have so many signs of it they say that he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven carried up in a cloud—and many many other things But none of that concerns me Their faith their teaching all their signs and wonders—nothing of all that is any concern of mine

For me the sign is the eternal unrest in my soul

Of course I ought to have let him lean his head

against my house But to me he was no god but just a criminal—one of the many who dragged themselves by with their cross with whom no one would have anything to do Compassion? Love of mankind? May be But I m not a loving man and have never pretended to be I m an ordinary person quite ordinary like most others When it happened I was a happy man carefree and heartless as is natural when one has nothing in particular on one s mind Wicked perhaps but not more so than others Of his doctrine of love I know little—only enough to be sure that it s not for me And besides is he himself really so loving? To those who love him he gives peace they say and he takes them up with him into his heaven but they say too that he hurls those who don t believe in him into hell If this is true then he seems to be exactly like ourselves just as good and just as bad Those we love we too treat well and we wish the rest all the evil there is If we had the power that he has we too perhaps would hurl them to damnation for all eternity though we can t be sure Only the malignity of a god surely could be great enough for that

I ve come upon these people here and there about the world but I ve never come to know them well I never get really close to anyone for they withdraw from me—they re timid aware no doubt of something odd about me something queer something that frightens them I expect it s my eyes that frighten them I ve

noticed that people look away if their eyes meet mine They daren t look into them—into these dried-up wells these depths with nothing in them Who is not frightened by such things? It s only natural that they should be

As *she* was

As she   By now she will have found men with young eyes I used to think to myself on my solitary wanderings And my heart would shrivel and I would hold my hand over my eyes as if to hide them though there was no one there to see no one from whom to hide them

And why should she not? It must be so When I had young eyes she loved me Did she?

Thus I thought to myself But once far away in a foreign land I met a man from the city of my birth who told me that my wife had died in her mother s house—little and wizened and no longer beautiful—and that long before then my son had died of the plague

So they were gone the two who had laughed together

How long ago is that? I cannot tell for time does not exist for me Why should it? But it feels a very long time ago

Yes they will all die One generation after another with their afflictions and crimes and all the things with which they afflicted and tormented one another But I

shall never die So long as these creatures exist—evil most often—I too shall exist evil myself their destiny is mine And that is why I ask about it—why I want to look into it into the future although I dread it Tear down the veil and let me see, however terrible it may be!

He was silent.

Darkness had fallen long before and from the one to whom he had spoken no answer came He sat as if alone

I have seen god as you have he added after a time I have met him and the meeting has filled my soul with horror

The old woman was quite hidden from him in the darkness But he heard her say in a low almost toneless voice

There is no joy in seeing god

And she rose drawing her garment about her as if she were cold It had indeed grown chilly since sunset and a light shiver ran through him too When she invited him to go in he followed her crouching through the low doorless opening He had never been in so small a human dwelling before He could not stand upright and from where he was he could touch every wall the wall that was the mountainside was dripping with moisture

She lit the fire taking fuel from a pile of brushwood and tree-roots on the earth floor The hearth was simply

a stone set in this floor and the smoke escaped through a hole in the slate roof against the mountain wall

When the fire blazed up he looked about him in that curious room and to his surprise he saw that they were not alone Away in a dim corner a grey-haired man was squatting—a man or a child he could not be sure which he could not determine and the uncertainty gave him a sense of something inexplicable almost frightening he could not think why this should be but so it was The face was like a child s with a smile which in the half-dark seemed enigmatic—enigmatic perhaps simply because he could see no reason for it It was neither a good nor a wicked smile it appeared altogether detached in its changelessness—perhaps that was what made it seem mysterious—although the eyes in that grizzled forward poking head followed their every move He thought it very strange For a moment a blurred memory crossed his mind—of what? A memory stirred by this smile? No he could not capture it he could not pin it down But this grey-headed child crouching in the half-dark with his changeless smile had a singular and frightening effect He could not take his eyes off it. What sort of a being was it what sort of secret, in this house which seemed hardly like a human dwelling at all?

'That is my son said the old woman You can speak quite freely before him he understands nothing

But the stranger could not bring himself to speak or

to ask about what was now occupying his thoughts—about the son who was to sit there in his corner listening to their conversation without understanding any of it and smiling that smile

It was the old woman who broke the silence at last, saying

That was a strange god you met Was he crucified?

Yes

Curious If he was god s son Why was it?

I don t know—I can t make out either what good it was supposed to do But I ve heard it said that it was because he had to suffer That his father wanted him to suffer But that s sheer madness I can t explain it either to you or to myself

A cruel god

Yes indeed But it s just hearsay To let a man suffer! What good can that do?

I think I recognise that god she murmured to herself And after a while she continued a little hesitantly And she who bore god this son—do you know anything of her?

No I never heard anything about her She was just an ordinary woman I should think

Yes I imagine so So you know nothing about her?

No All I heard them say was that by having this child she became god s mother—as of course she would No I know nothing about her why do you ask?

I was just wondering what she was like and what sort

of life she led How god treated her while he loved her and afterwards when perhaps he loved her no more Whether she was a happy woman I mean and whether bearing god s son gave her joy Or whether he let her be crucified too

No no of course he didn t! Of course not And anyhow she was a woman

Yes of course

She sat silent for a time Then she asked

This son—you said he was a god of love?

Yes you could call him that He preached the love of mankind—all people were to love one another That s what he meant I think if I ve rightly understood it.

What a strange teaching He must be an extraordinary god

That may well be

I ve never heard tell of such a god Yet I ve heard about so many that I thought I knew them all How happy she must have been It s a pity you don t know anything about her—the one who was allowed to bring him into the world—who was chosen for it

I wish he d never been born Then I might have lived my life happily as I did before I met him

Ay ay It s dangerous to meet a god as we all know But why didn t you let him lean his head against your house? Why did you deny him that? Such lovelessness must have been a great crime against him

Lovelessness! I am as I am and I ve never pretended to be anything different I m like everybody else and what s wrong with that? And do you think god himself is so full of love? Do you really think so? Has he shown himself so to you? Then why did he curse you.

The old woman made a sharp movement and he broke off She raked the fire with a half-charred branch and sent the sparks flying upward

After a while he went on

You committed a crime against god and were cursed by him as I was Why was that? Was he in the right? Is he always right? Are we never in the right against him?

He looked at her furrowed old face hoping that she would open her own surely tormented soul to him and let him see into her destiny which he believed would help him to understand his own But she just sat looking into the flames and he knew nothing of what stirred in her

That blind beggar down there told me about it but not so that one could understand what really happened to you.

How was it that you became priestess of the oracle? he went on after a pause hoping that she would at least tell him this

My parents were devout people she replied at last That was no doubt the reason And then we were very poor

Poor? Surely you couldn t be made priestess for that?

Ah yes I could But there s no joy in remembering such things

Was it here in Delphi?

No we lived some way down the valley We were peasants

Oh

You could see the place from here if it was daytime it s no further than that And although my eyes aren t what they were I can make out the gable end and the old olive-tree beside it But who lives there now I don t know

Have you no kinsfolk left?

Kinsfolk? I should hardly think so But how can I know? Kinsfolk? No those I speak of have been dead a long long time

You haven t spoken of any

No no I haven t that s true

But you were thinking of some perhaps?

Yes I was thinking of my parents of my mother and father But how long ago it is to think that one can remember things that were so long ago

My father was a good husbandman but the fields were small and meagre they yielded little toil as he might—and everything had to be done by hand he had no draught animals And of course the fields weren t his own he had to give most of the crop to the temple

which owned all the land there It was the god who owned it one might say we belonged entirely to the temple and to him There was little over when all dues had been rendered But we were content with little and had never known anything but poverty Yes and now after all I ve had to undergo I don t think of it as poverty I remember the fine big olives we used to get especially from the old tree at the end of the house—for it was old even then but it s often the old ones that bear the best I ve never tasted any since Not olives That too is long ago

And was it there you grew up?

Yes Two of their children died and I was the only one left So I had much love during my childhood and youth All the same I was alone—that s strange isn t it? *Children can be alone without anyone knowing it* even when they re surrounded by love Yes I must have been an odd child though it didn t show so much at first I went about on my own and was hardly ever with others of my age We lived a little apart too though there were other houses not far off The person I was with most often was my mother No doubt we were much alike—both serious We walked and talked with each other as if we were the same age and had the same experience of life In fact neither of us knew much about it She was quite untouched by what is usually called by that name—by all the meanness malice and confusion which men call life and which they pride

themselves on knowing so well She knew only the simple things what it was like to bear children and then lose them what it was like to love a man who had been young and strong and who was growing toil worn like herself Such things she knew and it may be called enough. Her soul was as pure and simple as a tree She was a tall woman and indeed she resembled a tree for there was something restful and peaceful about her We had a tree like that among the fields a little way down the valley—a big solitary tree which was sacred. Father worshipped it He went down to it every morning before beginning the day s work But mother and I went a little further down the valley and prayed to a spring which always had fresh verdure round its clear waters It was very holy If one stood and looked down into it one saw at once that it was divine One could see every grain of sand at the bottom and a place where they whirled gently round moved by an invisible finger of god

Yes my parents were very god fearing but for them god was springs and trees and sacred groves not the one up in the temple who was far too great and far away for them and to whom they paid their crushing hent. If they ever went up to Delphi—and it happened ry seldom—they preferred to visit the modest temple of Gaia the earth goddess it was just a little ber th den cabin and reminded them of their own simple father f living Of god s might and depth and dreadful

power over the human soul they had no idea—nor of all the shamelessness surrounding him and his temple

They ordered their own relationship with god and in a grove not far from the house we had our own little turf altar which father had built and at which he made sacrifice at the great annual festivals for tillers of the soil But on ordinary days too he liked to lay some little gift there when he came back in the evening after his day s work a few ears of corn from the fields or fruit and berries of some kind according to the season And of course before and after each meal he made offerings at the hearth like everyone else but I can still remember with what reverence he did it whereas so many others do it thoughtlessly with no sense of its content or meaning He was a heavy taciturn man and I remember his gentle but always rather sorrowful look and his big coarse hands which on the inside were like the bark of an old stone pine They made me feel so safe when he held me It was safe and sweet too when we went walking together and my little hand quite disappeared in his But he seldom said anything In his later years he grew more and more melancholy especially after mother s death And certainly too because of his sorrow at what happened to me He lived so long that he had to witness it all I ve often wondered whether he too cursed me

He died quite alone They found him under the tree I spoke of the one that was sacred but those who found him didn t know that it was sacred and therefore

couldn t understand why he had lain down under it to die No funerary sacrifices are offered at his grave, but I hope he is not angry with me on that account and that his soul is nevertheless at peace

As I grew up it began to be noticed that I was not quite like other girls of my age I saw visions and heard voices this was when the signs of womanhood first appeared Later it passed Yet I was still abstracted and alien to reality in some way I began to keep even more to myself than before and ceased to confide in mother I felt my loneliness and my difference from other people more keenly I could not explain it but it caused me suffering And I grew very restless I felt unsafe though I was in the midst of safety That very security began to disturb and oppress me It was queer I liked to feel it all about me—indeed I could not do without it—yet it gave me great distress Unknown to the others I became a stranger to their world though I lived in it and could have lived nowhere else What other world had I? None My parents were the only people who existed for me and I loved them infinitely Yet I went about my home like a stranger filled with an unease of which they had no inkling and which if they had they would not have understood They lived on in their simple faith in all about them and in a god who existed in everything that surrounded them

God? Had I a god any longer? Yes surely—but where was he? He was so far away he must have forsaken me

Or had I forsaken him? Had I? Was that it? Why else was I so restless so bereft of safety? Was not god that very safety—peace and safety? Was he not all the things I no longer possessed?

I had long spells of utter indifference And yet I burned with a vague longing for I knew not what And suddenly without warning and for no reason at all I would be filled with a glowing wave—a wave of happiness and excitement which at first was glorious but afterwards became so violent and hot that it filled me with anguish and terror so that I had to press my hand hard against my eyes for a while until the wave subsided and I became myself again Myself? But who was that?

Who was I?

All this time I was physically sound and healthy strong and powerfully built like my parents That was the curious thing I was a blend of disease and perfect health of an overstrung creature and an ordinary peasant girl For this reason my true state was not as noticeable as one might have expected

In time of course it became known that I was a little odd as indeed all our family were reputed to be This must have been what made the temple-people think of me when they needed a new pythia. I don t remember clearly but I believe I was about twenty when this happened Those who ruled and ordained made up their minds that this poor odd peasant girl

who was thought to be rather simple and whose parents were dependent on the temple and on god would do very well Also she came of a pious and very god fearing home they had heard and this was a good thing

Father and mother were quite bewildered when the proposal was made to them They had never imagined *such a thing* They realised *that it was a great* honour—for it was of course it was certainly that And they knew that the god was a great and mighty god who had an incomparable dwelling place a temple which they must say was very fine and splendid though they had only been inside it a few times and had felt quite lost there among all the precious things and strange people Nor could one well refuse the mighty ones up there the most powerful in all Delphi Whatever such men proposed must be right Though one didn t understand enough about it to know how to answer They supposed they would have to say yes—to trust in god and hope it was he who wished it anxious though it made them to hand me over to something they knew nothing whatever about

And I? I myself?

I was strangely troubled when I heard of it Chosen? Was I chosen? Summoned to the temple? To god?

Chosen to be his instrument to speak his words—*words inspired by him—I to be filled with his spirit* seized by holy rapture?

I? I chosen for this?

It aroused a tumult in me it frightened me annihilated me—and filled me with boundless happiness

Was it possible? Could *I* be wanted by god? But they said so they believed so By god who had forsaken me Whom I had forsaken Could such a thing come about? Was I chosen by him to be his handmaid his prophetess would he speak through *my* mouth? It was inconceivable—a miracle Was it the miracle I had been awaiting?

No god had not forgotten me not forsaken me nor I *him—no that never He called me and I came I* came with my whole heart already filled with him

God was calling me!

When the first feverish excitement had passed I went about in quiet joy thinking only of the wonder that awaited me Now I should know peace and security again with him

Mother and I were to go up to the temple together We went one morning and when we had made known our errand we were shown into a house by the temple court and taken before the man who at that time held the highest priestly office This was an elderly man a member of one of the foremost families in Delphi and we had never met such a person before He was kind and it was really not at all difficult He asked a few questions about our way of life and then talked to me for a time asking me about my childhood and other

things which I couldn t think why he should want to know about and he seemed satisfied with my presumably artless replies At last he told me that the god dwelling in this temple was the god of light that he was the greatest of all gods and his oracle the most eminent of any in the world To be its priestess called and initiated by the god himself was a signal grace and a great responsibility I stared down at the floor with my mind in a turmoil and full of happiness

Then he summoned a servant who led us across the open court into the temple and there handed us over to a priest who was now to take charge of us

I had never been in the temple before And while mother stood there simple and foreign to it all like any country woman without looking about her very much I gazed round enraptured overwhelmed by the wealth and magnificence of this holy room I had never seen anything like it before and could never even have imagined its existence I was seized with reverence and *joy to be standing here in the presence of the divine.* Yes this was indeed the temple of the god of light the god s own abode the house in which he dwelt.

The priest seemed pleased with my delight and also it seemed because strangely enough I had never been in there before He let me stand undisturbed in my adoration. Then he led us further into the sanctuary to its very heart. A narrow door led into another room and here he told mother to stay outside and wait for

us We entered the room which was not [illegible] and he told me that this was where th[illegible] assembled—those who came to consult the [illegible] we went down a narrow stairway into an [illegible] completely dark room lit only by two feeble c[illegible] The air here was oppressive and musty almos[illegible] ing and I felt I could hardly breathe Th[illegible] uneven and slimy and I realised that it was [illegible] living rock itself In it there was a crevice, over [illegible] stood a tall tripod flanked by two high bow[illegible] thought but I couldn t discern anything clea[illegible] saw no walls the place was just a sort of [illegible] ground full of queer smells—a sickly blend of [illegible] and stifling fumes that seemed to be rising f[illegible] rift in the rock and much to my surprise a faint [illegible] smell of goat I was shaken I breathed sh[illegible] panting and once I almost thought I was g[illegible] faint.

The priest who despite the darkness seemed [illegible] observing me closely explained that this was th[illegible] of holies where god spoke where he inspired th[illegible] with what she should utter in her delirium [illegible] that he would fill me with his spirit I panted and [illegible] not answer He seemed satisfied with me and with [illegible] impression the holy room had made upon my [illegible] mind And when he had forbidden me ever to [illegible] anything I had seen or might see we turned back [illegible] With my hand pressed hard against my eyes [illegible]

was when disturbed I followed him up the narrow stair

Mother seemed to have been waiting for us with some uneasiness and she looked at me searchingly when I rejoined her I was still breathing heavily but hoped she wouldn t notice it I looked about me with empty eyes in that great bright temple where the sunshine was pouring in exactly as before But I felt no gladness now And for a time as if too full of something else I closed my eyes against the light It was as if for the first time I had sensed something of god

We parted from the priest in the entrance hall He told me when to come again and mother and I went home in silence side by side She asked what he had shown me but I answered evasively and we went the whole way home without another word

I had to be alone with this as with everything else with the knowledge that god was incomprehensible inconceivable—that he dwelt in a hole in the ground—that he frightened me! And yet that I longed for him. For I did I did in spite of everything and although he was not at all as I had expected and would hardly help me as I had thought he would Though he was only calling me

Why me? Why should I of all people be the chosen one?

He had a temple up in the daylight too it was true A beautiful glorious temple But from what they told

me it was not the holiest place and it was not there tha. I was to serve him It was not there that he was waiting to fill me with his spirit There he was another being and had no use for me For it was not with his light tha he meant to fill my soul Down in a hole beneath th sanctuary he would reveal himself to me and I would be possessed by god

And yet—I longed to be there! Despite my fears, my terror of what awaited me I longed only to be ther ! I thought of nothing else never of anything b t of being shut into that musty stifling suffocating hole to prophesy with wide-open mouth to shriek out wild, incomprehensible words through frothing lips filled with his spirit to be used made use of by my god!

In this excitement I waited for what was to com. But in time the excitement subsided and was followed by a kind of lethargy in which I lived and moved, inwardly I was seething still though the tumul never broke out I don t know if those who now took charg of me noticed this—noticed my condition I was often up there for the feast-day upon which I was to become pythia was approaching and they wanted to prepare me for my task and keep me under their influence away from my parents I grasped little of these prepara ons, and in some I could see no purpose at all some years had passed I remember before I understood that some nasty thing they did to me was to find out whether I was a virgin I lived in another world than theirs,

perhaps god had plunged me into this lethargy to protect me to keep me living in his world and not in theirs It is possible though I know nothing about it

The seventh day of the spring month which is god s day was drawing near and it was then that I was to be pythia for the first time I was the only one they could turn to for the woman who had been pythia before me had died quite suddenly some time earlier in circumstances which they did not want known. They were expecting many pilgrims to come for the festival which lasted several days and they were uneasy about my performance since I had never done it before—about whether god would speak through me and whether I could endure the intense strain for so many days on end They were full of consideration and care But not on my account I realised that even then though I was like a child and had hardly ever been out among people before and knew almost nothing about them I understood too that they lived not for god but for his temple —that it was the temple they loved and not him—and for its prestige and renown in the world Great flocks of pilgrims would certainly be coming to this god s most solemn festival as usual bringing the temple many gifts which would still further increase its wealth and power All the inns were expected to be full and everyone in the city would profit in one way or another by what was to take place These feasts which brought visitors from all over the world meant much to the

people here indeed it was by them they lived The whole city was preparing to receive the guests

I didn t understand this then I knew nothing about it but later I was to know it all too well I was to learn what manner of thing surrounded god and his holy place and what his fame meant to the people in all these houses that clung to the mountain round about the temple like a swarming ant hill Because of their association with god and because they did no mundane work they considered themselves to be in a privileged position and in fact looked down upon the strangers who made their way to this remarkable community in the mountains They were very proud of their city and regarded it as holy because everyone in it lived on god

But all this was still hidden from me I noticed a great commotion but gave it no thought and in a way did not see it I went about in my daze into which god himself had perhaps plunged me seemingly untouched by anything outside

The day came god s day with which his festival opened and I remember that morning very well Never was there such a sunrise over these mountains—never at least that I have seen I had fasted for three days and was light weightless as a bird I bathed in Castalia s spring the water was fresh and I felt pure—freed from all that did not belong to god s morning They dressed me as a bride—his bride—and I walked slowly along the sacred way to the temple People must have been

massed all along the wayside and in the open court itself but I never noticed them or knew that they were there I existed only for god And I walked up the steps of the temple where one of his servants sprinkled me with holy water and stepped into his radiant sanctuary into all the brightness where he was not waiting for me where I might not serve him I walked through it with the tears burning under my closed eyelids—for I shut my eyes not to see his glory and perhaps fail him—fail in the task which he had given me to do and for which he had chosen me Led between two priests I passed the altar where his eternal fire was burning entered the pilgrim s hall and went down the narrow dim stairway into the holy of holies

There was as little light there as before and it was some time before I could make anything out But I noticed the stifling fumes from the cleft at once and they seemed even more stifling and swooning than before I smelt the stench of goat too but this time it was much stronger and more pungent I could not explain it There must have been something burning there for I could smell that as well And then after a while I saw a glow in a bowl in the darkness and a little man was crouching over it fanning life into the embers with a bird s wing that looked like a kite s A yellow-grey snake writhed past his foot and vanished swiftly in the darkness This filled me with terror for I had heard it whispered that the former pythia died

from the bite of such a snake but I had not believed it, and I had seen no snakes when I was there before. Later I learned that it was true that they were always there and were much venerated, because they were holy beasts and had divine percipience. I also learned that the embers glowing in the bowl were pieces of laurel-wood, which was the god's sacred tree and whose smoke the priestess must inhale to be filled with his spirit.

Now the little man rose up from his bowl and bird's wing and looked at me so kindly that my terrors were a little allayed. His dry wizened face was good-natured and he even smiled at me a little. I didn't know then that he was to be my only friend in the sanctuary, my help and consolation through the years and especially when fate swooped down upon me like an eagle from its cleft. In my present drowsy state I took little note of him but I felt that he was not like the others and that he meant me nothing but good although he had to attend to his work here. It was he who now handed me a bowl of fresh laurel leaves recently plucked in the god's sacred grove; these I must chew together with ashes, for this too would fill me with his spirit. And it was then that the little servant of the oracle smiled at me as if to calm my fears and amongst all these frightening things his smile was kind and reassuring. But of course he said nothing to me for here in the holiest place no one might speak.

What he gave me tasted horrible and whether

because of its effect on me or because of my exhaustion after fasting I felt ill and reeled a little The two priests of the oracle who were watching me the whole time helped me up on to the tripod which was too high for me to mount unaided then they set the dish of embers on a high stand bringing it to a level with my head and with every breath I had to inhale the drugging smoke It was acrid and produced a peculiar giddiness But it was the fumes rising from the cleft in the rock that affected me most for I was far more aware of them now that I was sitting directly over them they were poisonous and nauseous It was horrible and the thought flashed through my mind that the cleft was believed by some to run right down into the realms of death from which the oracle really drew its power for death knows all things I was seized with horror at having this beneath me horror of losing consciousness and perhaps sinking and being engulfed in it—horror of the realms of death the realms of death I felt myself sinking sinking But where was god where was god! He was not there he was not coming to me He did not fill me with his spirit as he had promised I was only sinking sinking

With my senses quite clouded half-conscious I dimly saw one of the priests of the oracle leading forward from the obscurity a he-goat with unusually large horns it seemed to me that he poured water over its head. Then I knew no more

But all at once everything changed I [illegible] release a feeling not of death but of [illegible] indescribable feeling of delight but to [illegible] unprecedented It was he! He! It was [illegible] me I felt it I knew it! He was filling [illegible] annihilating me and filling me utterly with [illegible] with his happiness his joy his raptur [illegible] wonderful to feel his spirit his inspiration com[illegible] me—to be his his alone to be possessed by god [illegible] ecstasy his happiness by the wild joy that [illegible] Is there anything more wonderful than sharing [illegible] delight in being alive?

But the feeling mounted and mounted it [illegible] full of delight and joy but it was too violent too [illegible] powering it broke all bounds—it broke me [illegible] it was immeasurable demented—and I felt my [illegible] beginning to writhe to writhe in agony and tor[illegible] being tossed to and fro and strangled as if I were [illegible] suffocated But I was not suffocated and instead I b[illegible] to hiss forth dreadful anguished sounds utterly [illegible] to me and my lips moved without my will it [illegible] I who was doing this And I heard shrieks loud shriek I didn t understand them they were quite unintelligible yet it was I who uttered them They issued from my gaping mouth though they were not mine It was not myself at all I was no longer I I was his his alone it was terrible terrible and nothing else!

How long it went on I don t know I had no sense of

time while it was happening Nor do I know how I afterwards got out of the holy of holies or what happened next who helped me and took care of me I awoke in the house next to the temple where I lived during this time and they said I had lain in a deep sleep of utter exhaustion And they told me that the priests were much pleased with me and that I had exceeded all their hopes as priestess of the oracle The old woman with whom I lived told me this and then she left me to have a thorough rest.

I lay there in my bridal gown as god s bride It was the only bridal gown I would ever wear And I remember feeling the fine strange fabric and being very lonely

God? Who was god? And where was he now? Why was he not here? No longer with me? Where was he my bridegroom? Why had he forsaken me?

I didn t understand him But I longed for him No I didn t understand him at all I didn t know at all who he was—less than ever since I had been his since he had filled me with his spirit with his bliss his rapture until I screamed with pain Yes he had filled me with agony Nevertheless I longed for him and him only For without him all was nothingness and void.

Suppose he were to come here to me from his temple where no doubt he was now being worshipped by his people by all those who adored him there for his glory s sake! If he were to come and take me in his

arms as lovers surely do afterwards Not let me lie here quite alone in my bridal gown as if forsaken by him by my beloved now that he had no further use for me—now that I had fulfilled my task and to his satisfaction Now that the fever the delirium the possession was over Why did he love me only then? Why was he with me only then?

How gladly I would have rested quite still in his embrace without raving or any excitement. Just rested safely and happily in his arms

No I did not want to be possessed by god I wanted him to love me as he loved others and give me security and peace thereby Only peace and security in his embrace

Or did I not want this? Was this not what I longed for?

It was it was But should I ever experience it? Was I meant for that—was it for that he wanted to use me?

Security Peace How could I desire such things? How could I believe I could find such things in his embrace? How could I ask security of god?

God could not be as I wished him to be as I so much wanted him to be He could not God was not security and repose and rest He was unrest conflict and uncertainty Those things were god.

I lay and watched dusk darkening in the room. He had plunged me into so deep a sleep that it was now evening—the day was over

In the morning early in the morning as soon as the sun rose above the mountains my bridegroom would come to me he would fill me again with his spirit his hot breath his bliss and I should be his once more!

So began my life as his priestess—my long service with him.

I lived sometimes at home sometimes in the house by the temple with the old woman who had charge of me She had always tended the pythia during the great festivals For the festivals were many and long and the service of the oracle was so exhausting that the prophetess had to be cared for by someone she had to rest thoroughly afterwards and at night have a quiet and strengthening sleep A great part of the old woman s life had been spent in this work under the direction of the priests She knew all about the pythias from a long time back and liked to talk of them She always wanted to talk She knew all about the priests too—what they were like which of them really believed and which only pretended I learned at once that the one who first led me into the holy of holies only pretended yet he was greatly respected for as treasurer he had done much for the temple His period of office was now nearly at an end appointments were held only for a fixed number of years All came of good families in Delphi Those in the highest positions were drawn from the most eminent families and of these she talked often and in great detail In her eyes it seemed to be this fact which

gave the temple its real prestige The sanctuary and all concerning it lay very close to her heart and she was evidently extremely proud of her position there Of god I never heard her speak

Despite her respect for the men in high places and their birth she never spoke well of them—no not even of them She never spoke a really good word for anyone but she had a keen eye for human failings The image of the world that I so young and inexperienced gained through her was warped and distorted I felt this yet I could see that much of it was true and it puzzled and bewildered me I have often thought that this woman whom I came to loathe and despise so heartily did more to form my views of mankind than anyone else and made them bitter and unjust Despite my loathing of her and my conviction that she was wrong she did influence me And at last by revealing herself to me in all her vileness she confirmed me in my belief that her false idea of human beings was the right one Thus we gather knowledge which we call truth from those in whom we least believe and unconsciously let ourselves be led by what we most heartily detest

Later I myself experienced much human malignity and added it to what I had absorbed from her But now after sitting up here in my solitude for so long thinking of all I went through I ve often asked myself in spite of what was done to me Are men really so wicked?

Has not my own bitter destiny led me astray in my judgment of them? I don't know for I never meet anyone now But in my loneliness I have thought so

She influenced me because so much of what she said was true. She was speaking the truth when she told me of the baseness of the holy city and the licentiousness attending the great festivals All these men from every corner of the world had to have light women and all the poor girls in the place—and not only the poor ones either—were procured for them by the agency of the inns There were few virgins in Delphi she declared—and that must have been why I had been chosen as pythia she blurted out suddenly making me quite red and confused and then she said no more of that. And then there were all the rogues and cheats who were attracted by the fairground life of the great festivals and all the shady and dishonest dealing that went on under the very wing of the temple There were scoundrels even among the priests who took bribes for giving the desired answers from the oracle and for giving the pythia's utterances the desired interpretation—though she had to admit that this was rare—or who kept the money paid over at the sacrifices or made profits for themselves by selling the skins of sacrificial animals and so on all kinds of ways of cheating the temple were open to those who held the right appointments in it and, so far as she knew many—even perhaps most—people took advantage of such opportunities

I must say that her nasty talk and the falsehood and meanness of which she told me and which I unhappily had many chances of observing for myself all round me gave me a very lofty idea of god and love for him If he was surrounded by such corruption—if he arose from such a morass as this—he was the more extraordinary the more worthy to be loved And it was necessary to love him For what else was there in this dirty world to love but him? And what desolation it was to be tossed out into it as I had been tossed out into this detestable world of men

I longed to leave her evil prattling and everything else behind me and return to him—to him whom she never mentioned I was thankful that she did not I longed for his embrace for the dark hole in the ground where he would enfold me in his arms and fill me with his heavenly ecstasy his wild bliss his spirit

His spirit? And what was his spirit? Was it simply sublimity and greatness? Exaltation? Only that?

If so if it were as simple as that why was it such anguish to be his? Why need I suffer agony and shriek with pain? Why was his love not gentleness and peace as I so longed for it to be? Why did it bring me no safety never the safety for which I prayed continually from my innermost heart? He was wonder release—why must he be also terrible and frightening and cruel *and immense—why so many things at once—why did* he strangle me at the moment of bliss and leave me

forsaken when he seemed nearest and I most needed him?

Who was he? Who?

I threw myself into his arms wild and fevered like himself and before he stunned me and annihilated me with his immensity I cried god who are you who are you? But he never answered

He filled me with himself erased me with himself but who he was he did not reveal

He never did To this day I sit here in my loneliness and think about him wondering who he is I ask still but he does not answer

Yes I loved him I loved him with all my heart But my love did not make me happy It was not that kind of love

But I was going to talk about the old woman To me she was always good and kind and she praised me in exaggerated terms The priests had told her that I was the best pythia they had had for a very long time she said and among all those whom she had had living with her not one could be compared with me She spoke very contemptuously of these predecessors of mine it was painful to hear her talk so of these women whom I could not think of without sympathy and a sense of fellowship I had seen one or two of them in the streets of Delphi especially one thin queer woman who slunk along the rows of houses mumbling to herself incessantly The old woman laughed heartily at this one making fun of the fact that she had lost what little wits

she ever had but I listened with a shudder reflecting that I too might come to the same end

It was a long time before I realised that it was as priestesses that she despised them For other reasons too certainly but above all because they had been pythias for this she thought contemptible in itself

I was astounded Could she be serious? Yes there was no doubt about it She did not say so directly to be sure but for all that it was plain enough I cannot say how amazed I was to discover this

And now that my eyes were opened at last I found that she was not alone in her opinion I began noticing those about me—their treatment of me their behaviour to me—and I understood ever more clearly that it was as she had hinted and that I held a despised position among mankind People avoided me Yes I had noticed that long before and realised that it arose from timidity a dread of someone who had been in such close touch with the divine which as everyone knows is a dangerous matter—of one who was sometimes possessed by god and whose shrieks in the secret pit below the ground could at times be heard up in the temple People hung back from me and I didn t wonder at it—but now I saw that they also looked down on me they regarded me as a sort of outcast and preferred to ignore me I kept myself to myself always and liked best to be alone as had been my way from a child but now it dawned on me that in fact no one wanted to be with me or have

anything to do with me—that my solitude was enforced and real.

It is strange how depressed and sad this made me Although I cared nothing for company and wanted none although I seemed born to loneliness nevertheless it saddened me And when young people in the street nudged one another and whispered as I passed it cut me to the quick though I didn t really understand why it should

Did they despise me too? They probably never thought about it but they must have felt that I was different.

Yes and I was I was not like them Not young as they were

Young? I wasn t really much older than they But young? Young?

They never spoke to me No one did unless it was really n cessary

Even the priests who praised me so—for they did praise me both to my face and to others—and valued me for the sake of the oracle never said anything to me beyond what was needful for my service and for my tasks in connection with it They were interested in me only as a pythia as one employed in the sanctuary I had no other existence for them And without ever saying a harsh word—rather indeed by a constant condescending kindness—they showed that there was a gulf fixed between them and this poor ignorant girl from

a poor family somewhere down the valley They appreciated me and prized me as a good pythia—one through whom god clearly liked to speak and whom he filled at once with his mighty spirit—but although this meant that I was of great service to them and although I was chosen by god they looked upon me as they always looked upon those so employed They felt nothing but a sort of pitying contempt for this poor raving half-conscious woman whom they set upon the tripod in the god s stifling pit Her inspiration was divine no doubt but it was they who interpreted it and knew how to extract a meaning from what for everyone else was unintelligible confused utterance The great thoughts the lofty wisdom which they put into the oracle s answers—those famous answers which conferred world-wide power and prestige upon the oracle—had nothing to do with the wild shrieks of this ignorant woman or very little She was possessed by god certainly god spoke through her But it was they who knew what god really meant and wanted to say—they who knew how to penetrate the core of him and reveal it

And it was true I had no share in this in their wise interpretations of his message I was altogether shut out I didn t know what I said what I screamed in my delirium my possession their manner of interpretation and exploitation had nothing to do with me I was simply filled with god

I didn t know what he put into me I knew nothing of his wisdom I knew in fact nothing at all about him nor guessed who he might be I was simply filled with him I only felt him in me I was his No more

But was this so contemptible? I could not see it To be filled with god—how could they feel such profound contempt for this? I did not understand

What I had taken to be a divine grace an election a call from him to be his chosen one his priestess the one through whose mouth he spoke they regarded as somehow degrading Degrading to be the elect of god!

The oracle was said to command veneration throughout the world yet the one into whom god injected his *spirit in whom he took up his abode* was an outcast with whom no one would come in contact or even speak.

I was baffled

The woman with whom I lived who was honest in her own peculiar way told me how fortunate it was that they had found me since it was so difficult to find anyone willing to be pythia Not even the poorest would be pythia now And she hinted that no one but *my poor simple-minded parents* who lived all on their own in the valley and were a little queer in the head could have been persuaded to consent to it.

I was utterly confounded You can well imagine how it troubled and oppressed me and how many fearful thoughts it aroused in me

Chosen? Suppose after all I had not been chosen? Or

not by god only by the priests who perhaps didn t even believe in him Suppose what she said was true and they had only taken me from my poor ignorant parents by guile because they could get no one else? Suppose god had not called me at all and I was not his elect his chosen?

I had believed myself to be so and I had felt myself seized by his spirit filled with him I thought. But was it so? Was it quite certainly so? How could I tell! Certainly I had felt myself to be one with him—I had felt myself full of his glory yet immediately afterwards I was quite forsaken and alone and he was not with me at all Almost always I was forsaken by him filled only by a boundless void I longed for him but he was indifferent I cried out for him but he made no reply I asked Who are you? But he did not tell me You whom I love above all else! But he gave me no answer Never any answer

Until he came to me again hurled himself upon me again like a storm of savage heat rapture bliss At such times I was happy—happier than all other people in the world—everything was right and perfect—for a little while Then I was cast down into emptiness again In an emptiness which no one else had ever had to feel—not as I felt it—I who had been his who had shared god s vast joy at being alive

Thus it was for me Thus was my love for god—and I did not even know who he was

It gave me no security no assurance no certainty I could never rest quietly in his embrace Heat and rapture I felt but never stillness and serenity I prayed for it but he never gave it me

Can it be so if one is the elect of god?

I kept these thoughts to myself as usual Whom could I share them with in whom could I confide? The only one who could have helped me and answered my questions was more remote than ever before I had never felt so far from him as during this time I longed to throw myself in his arms—I longed only for that —yet at the same time I dreaded it for the first time I was full of fear—fear of the day when once more I should be as a bride and led down into his pit—down into the holy of holies to meet him

I had long to wait for no festival was near Then an oracle-day was fixed upon between festivals as was sometimes done when pilgrims were expected The morning came I bathed in Castalia s spring and was dressed in my bridal gown I walked up the sacred way passed through the temple and down the dim stair as usual. All was as usual in the cave and I breathed the air there greedily the smoke from the smouldering laurel the acrid goat stench the sickening fumes from the cleft under the tripod—all that could drug me excite me deliver me into his embrace Burning with desire for him I sat with eyes closed with the taste of the leaves from his sacred tree in my mouth waiting to be

filled with him again—with his living spirit his painful delight and bliss waiting for him to erase me and all my longing and my doubt and bring all to consummation

But he did not come He did not come I inhaled the vapours in deep eager draughts and felt them working in me—felt that I was near to stifling and swooning But they had no other effect on me I was not inspired by god and I did not feel his presence

They brought forward the goat his sacred beast they poured water on its head—and it was then at that moment that his spirit was supposed to come upon me But the animal simply lowered its head to the ground with a queer whining cry and then dragged itself back to its obscurity The priest of the oracle gave in thinking it useless to try any longer

I sat there with staring eyes my dry quivering lips parted for a cry that never came I was quite empty with an emptiness and desolation I had never known before though I had felt something like it often enough There was emptiness all about me too as if there were nothing there and when I stretched out my hand before me it was as if I stretched it into perfect vacancy and boundless desolation Only the fumes from the kingdom of death rose up round me enveloping me in their icy chill

They had to help me down from the tripod and when they let go of me I reeled and almost fell The only one who noticed this was the little servant of the

oracle he hurried up and supported me I stood leaning against the doorpost until I had mastered the dizziness that had seized me and seized me in vain

The priest of the oracle—the one who had first shown me the holy of holies—was much displeased with me and displeased too because he had to dismiss with their errand unfulfilled those who were waiting in the pilgrims hall They were only simple country folk to be sure who had come to consult the oracle about their everyday cares and worries Nevertheless he was annoyed on the temple s account that I had failed and been unreceptive to god s inspiration He used no harsh words yet his feelings were plain He did not believe in god yet he was angry because I had not been filled with him as usual

But what was his displeasure compared to my own despair at what had happened—to the abyss into which I had been hurled? Now I knew that I had been forsaken by god, utterly forsaken Now it was no longer a matter of uncertainty and unrest but of certainty He did not care about me and wanted to have nothing to do with me And had he ever cared? Had I ever been summoned chosen by him as I had fancied? And I had believed that he had called for me! Had he ever wanted me as his instrument his elect his priestess?

The priests had wanted me yes They had wanted a poor foolish woman to use in his service But god himself had never wanted her When they forced her

upon him he took her to himself and flung her away again He had shown his contempt for the peasant girl whom they had brought to him in the belief that he would accept her and fill her with his holy spirit love her as she loved him Violated and tossed aside It was for this that I had been chosen

Called for me? He had never called for me how could I have imagined it? It was I who in my loneliness my abandonment had called upon him

In my despair I tortured myself with these bitter hopeless thoughts I believe I should have broken down altogether had it not been for the little servant of the oracle He comforted me and reasoned with me he took it more sensibly than I did Such a thing was bound to happen at times he said and he had long experience of the oracle pit It happened to all pythias and quite often and it had to happen to me too sooner or later It didn t mean that god had forsaken his chosen one certainly not But at times like these the priest of the oracle was always annoyed for he was concerned about the reputation of the oracle as was only natural and he probably found it vexing that it should occur on the day he was on duty But god was not angry—not in the least that was not the reason No one could really tell what the reason was no human being could ever know That was the secret of the oracle-pit and it was never revealed.

He himself had had a vague feeling that things were

not quite as usual that day—not quite as they should be Why he could not say but he had seen it all so often and could usually feel these things He had sensed it as soon as he went down into the holy of holies long before I came He had scented it as it were beforehand And then the little grey and yellow snakes had not shown themselves—they had not emerged from the secret crevices and that was a bad sign a very bad sign And the goat the god s sacred beast of which he had charge and which he looked after between oracle-days had behaved queerly that morning when he led it from its stall to the oracle-hole it had bleated and struggled as if unwilling to go So what with one thing and another he had felt that nothing would go right and that there would be no oracle today

But it was no fault of mine certainly not I was in no way to blame I was a very fine pythia and must surely be much beloved of god It was clear that he liked to talk through me he came to me so quickly and I slipped so easily into the proper receptive state During the ecstasy my face showed that I was filled with him Anyone who had been there as long as he had could tell that at once

Thus he talked to me and brought me gradually to a calmer more reasonable frame of mind His words his very nature and his little face with its kindly wrinkles had a beneficent and calming effect on me And I should have been even calmer if I had known

that at the next festival all would go well once more and just as usual

In time I came to realise that it might have been because I had felt anxious uncertain and doubtful about my meeting with god and because I had feared it That must be wrong One ought not to feel uneasiness hesitancy or doubt in one s soul for then one could scarcely be received into his arms

Yet how could one be without dread without doubts? How could one approach god without them?

This I did not confide to my friend I never really confided in him at all It might sadden him I thought

We became very good friends during this time and remained so as long as I was with the oracle

We suited one another well for he too was despised But I believe he never gave that a thought—was never even aware of it—whereas I was troubled by it Why should I have been? No one had so modest a position in the temple as he yet it contented him no one could have been more content than he was He swept the floor of the temple and the steps outside he sprinkled water and then with his broom swept out all the dirt that the visitors had brought in He kept the place clean for god And he did this most conscientiously it was always beautifully neat and clean This was his main task but he had many others He tended the laurel trees in the god s sacred grove he replenished the bowls of holy water at the entrances to the temple he fed the veno-

mous little oracle-snakes with birds eggs and mice he carried wood for the eternal fire on god s altar in the sanctuary and made sure that it never went out for although this was not his responsibility yet it was he who saw to it He made sure that all was in order in the holy of holies and on oracle-days he served and helped there as I have described He was put to every kind of task. He won small thanks The priests treated him with condescension and often scolded him except for the senior ones who never addressed him at all Were one to judge by the treatment he received one would fancy him almost useless but in fact he did his work very scrupulously and I m sure that god was well pleased with him He more than anyone loved and venerated the temple it was the apple of his eye But he loved god too though not in any ceremonious manner and not by talking about him very much he loved him as he loved his work his situation his cleaning-duties whose importance he well understood He looked after god s house and was ever busy with some work or other for him He had a great deal to do with him but no problems or troubles ever arose between them there was only mutual trust and kindness No great distance divided them and inferior though his position was he was never anxious or uncertain but felt himself to be close to god—a good friend of his He associated with him unaffectedly and all was natural and easy between them

It was pleasant to see how he lived to feel the serenity that surrounded him and in some sort to share in it I think he was the happiest person I ever met He knew there was purpose in all he did and he was good friends with god

Little wonder then if he paid no attention to the opinions of men or to their treatment of him and in any case as I said he noticed nothing wrong with it He was so ingenuous so utterly without suspicion and without observation of human beings as to be quite touching at times one could almost have laughed at him for it Friendly and smiling he wandered among them all including those who never showed him any kindness in return He lived for his simple menial tasks with a simple everyday piety of which he himself was quite unconscious He was so devout that he never even knew it

How well I remember him long ago though it is I remember that the soles of his feet were always coal-black for the sacred place might not be entered save with bare feet and he was constantly in it so that the grime became ingrained and never wore off Whenever he bustled about in there in his eager way one saw the black soles of his feet

He is the only one of those down there in the temple whom I remember with gladness yes and I find it still does me good to think about him He must have died long ago

At the next great festival as I said all went well from the first day largely because he helped me The evening before he sat with me and talked reassuringly and encouragingly and then when the time came in the morning and I felt anxious and tense again it was he who made me quite forget it When he handed me the bowl of leaves to chew he whispered to me softly that the little oracle snakes had come out of their crannies and he smiled contentedly with all his wrinkles next he coaxed me into my trance and then into the rapture the possession which I so longed to feel Afterwards it was seldom that the ecstasy failed me but when it did it was always just as terrible as the first time

They became increasingly pleased with me and as the years went by it began to be said of me as the blind beggar told you that I was the best pythia they had ever had—though that can t be true—and that god would not speak through anyone but me This was because once when they tried another woman to ease my burden during the lengthy festivals she had no success and I had to go on bearing it alone as before

The regard in which I was held led to my staying on with the oracle as priestess instead of leaving it after a few years as was usual—usual because for one thing most of them lacked the strength to continue longer It was good to have a pythia with such a reputation as mine and they didn t want to lose me Nor did I want to leave the temple and its service The oracle-pit and

all connected with it held me captive everything that happened to me there—my transformation into something other than myself the wildness the possession the transcending of all bounds—was something I could no longer be without I could no longer live without it

I was also accorded more respect because I had become so well known as a pythia because everyone knew I was of service to the temple of the oracle and therefore to the town and because I was considered to be chosen by god in an especial manner But this very fact made people shyer of me than ever and indeed I seemed to inspire them with a kind of fear They avoided me more than before and I was completely shut out from all human society All knew in what a fearful relationship I stood to god and how terrible my face was when he filled me with himself It made me lonelier than any other person in the holy city

No one saw me as anything but the priestess of the oracle did I myself? I was one with the oracle and had no life of my own no existence but in and through it Yes I was a pythia only and no longer a person in the usual meaning of the word

I now lived almost entirely in Delphi at the temple s expense and seldom visited my parents and my home in the valley I had become quite strange to them and I felt that they were as shy of me as everyone else When I visited them and we started to talk to each other we seemed not to know what to talk about Of my life we

could say nothing they didn t understand it and were troubled by hearing of it And there was so little to be said about their life we felt it glided by just as before —just as it had always done—and I knew it inside out Or did I? Did I know it any longer?

I had become a stranger to their world and remote from it Although I could see that it was exactly as it had been before and therefore familiar to me I was still a stranger there Nothing is more foreign than the world of one s childhood when one has truly left it

They were old now both of them and they showed it. They moved more slowly and mother had grown very thin She looked about her with sunken eyes like an old bird And she liked to sit and rest in silence We had so little to say to one another

I myself was no longer young How old was I when mother died? Well up in the thirties I should think

A message was sent to the temple to say that she was dying but they could not give it me at once for I was just on my way to the holy of holies and if I had known of it I could not have performed my task and received god s inspiration I had first to do my duty to the temple and to him And on that particular day there were exceptionally many pilgrims it was the last day of the great spring festival and the oracle went on for an unusually long time The little oracle-servant whispered the news to me as soon as I showed signs of coming round but I was still in my exaltation my trance and

found it hard at first to grasp what he was saying it seemed so remote and somehow irrelevant Gradually I took it in however and hurried home in agitation

I was still dazed when I arrived hot and out of breath at the house where an infinite stillness reigned It was always quiet there but now it was quieter than ever I felt I was disturbing an ineffable peace

I was still wearing my bridal gown—the one I wore in the oracle-pit as god s bride And I noticed that father looked at it in wonder though he said nothing

Mother was lying with a perfectly white face and closed eyes I thought she was already dead But when I sat down beside her and began sobbing she opened her eyes and looked at me with a look I shall never forget It came from so far away that I don t know how it reached me—reached anything so alien and remote Who was this unknown woman who had come and sat down at her side so strangely dressed—dressed for something—she could not remember what?

Then she seemed to recognise me she saw who I was and realised that I had come at last It was she who had asked *father to send for me I learned afterwards* so that she might see me before she died But what was I wearing? How strangely I was dressed!

Slowly she stretched out her emaciated hand and fingered my bridal gown the stuff of it without comprehension It must have seemed to her that I was masquerading—as indeed I was She must have thought

so—she who had really been a bride and borne children to a man and loved him and them She lay picking at my fine bridal dress without understanding With a weary pained look she closed her eyes and her hand dropped gaunt and empty

I left my place at her side and father took it With his hand in hers she slipped quietly away

To my despair I still felt fever and excitement as she went

With his great coarse hand father stroked her face which he had caressed when it was young and he must have been thinking of much that I had never known and would never hear about—things that belong to the life of mankind

Unnoticed by him I went and took off my bridal gown and put on an old kirtle which I found somewhere left over from my youth

When I came back he was still sitting and looking at her and he still did not notice me He saw nothing but her worn face which he had loved when it was alive and loved still—a face as pure and simple as her soul had always been Now the soul had left it but it was still filled with the memory of that soul

I too went forward and looked at it and saw how beautiful and how transfigured it was But when I saw its infinite peace I wept

It was we two who had once been so much alike

He had folded her hands upon her breast and they

were white and thin almost transparent though they had toiled at many tasks throughout a long life Now they were quite white as if all that was earthly were already being erased from them

Later we helped each other to wash the dead body and anoint it with oil Then we carried it to a bier that father had made and laid it there upon a bed of thyme and olive-twigs according to the old custom to give it back to life And although I would have helped him it was father who with his stiff fingers wove a myrtle-wreath and set it about her head because she was now initiated and a partaker of the divine He was scrupulous that all things should be duly observed and so they were

Finally he laid a few ears of grain upon her sunken breast and covered her face with a cloth that she might be at peace

Next day he dug a grave in the grove some little way from the house not far from the turf altar at which he offered gifts almost every day Together we carried out the bier which was heavy for me for she was not a slight woman and lowered it into the earth

There she lay on her bed of fresh leaves restored to the earth to the womb For the last time we beheld her peaceful face then father cast earth upon her and later sowed grain upon the grave as the custom was For she belonged not to death but to life

I stayed with father for a time to help him settle

down I was able to do this for the great festival was over The house needed a woman to look after it and father was used to having one And I was glad to stay there at least for a time to walk in the peace and stillness that reigned there of which I myself stood in such need For I was distressed by what had happened—by her fingering my bridal gown and scarcely recognising me—distressed because I had come too late to beg forgiveness for being no longer like her because I had disturbed the stillness of her death and because her hand had dropped empty from my lap Distressed by all th se things

It is strange that the peace in someone s face can be felt as a reproach but I did feel it so I reproached myself for not possessing it for being incapable of it I reproached myself for my whole soul my life my existence as it had now become Why was I not like her? Why was my life not like hers? Why was not all life all the world like her? Why was not everything as it had been in my childhood? As it was when we used to go down together to the sacred spring in the valley—the one with the ever fresh greenery about its clear waters and the grains of sand so gently stirred by the invisible finger of god? Why did we not still walk side by side as then? There was so much I should have liked to talk to her about

She had lain here waiting for me but I had not come—until it was too late I had been too greatly pre-

occupied with the great festival to think of her to come down here and find out for myself that she was ill—that she was dying Too much taken up with things she could not understand—things one could not explain to her Things that lay beyond her grasp but held me captive so that I could not live without them

Not live without them? But her world—could I live without that? Could I really?

The great festival which I could not leave—from which I could not tear myself away—the wildness the rapture the obsession—what was that compared to the peace in a human face and to the possession of that peace?

What did I possess? And what had I lost? What was my world to hers—to the world I lost when I forsook her?

I would have sat here at her side in the stillness holding her hand in mine It was here I ought to have been

I perceived that the solemn festival had been here when my mother lay dying

Yes I felt I wanted to stay here for a time and live in this peace and safety In her world For a time at least

Often I sat by the hearth in the place where she used to sit and I found I liked the smell of the old house. This was strange for before when I came to see them I never liked it It had seemed to me unpleasant probably

because I knew it so well And the quietness the safety of the place had oppressed me Now I sank into it feeling it take me to itself and enfold me It was sweet to me now

So it was that I came once more to experience the home of my childhood To relive the fields the earth the old olive-tree by the gable end the grove with its turf altar where mother now lay and the path winding down the valley to the spring All these familiar things became dear to me again they enfolded me faithfully, and it almost seemed as if I had never left them Yet I still felt uncertain of their reality and sometimes I was disturbed by other thoughts nevertheless it did seem that I was on my way back to real everyday life

Father continued his work in the fields and I kept house as best I could I had lost touch with it and forgotten it but I soon got into the way of it again We lived a pleasant life together

Strangely enough we never talked much about mother though we both thought of her constantly Father erected a stele over her grave and made frequent sacrifice there They were simple offerings such as suited them both I used to see him standing there and afterwards when he came up to me by the house his gaze was abstracted as if he were still far away It was almost odd to see that gentle sad look in the face of so big and sturdy a man His gaze was as clear as a child's though the expression was not at all that of a child He

grew more and more silent but his melancholy was full of goodness

I remember him so well as he was during this time—the last time I was together with him He would come slowly in at the door in the evenings and when he had eaten his big old hands remained resting on the table stiff and tired unused to idleness Seeing them I could not help recalling how safe and comforting it had felt when in my childhood he held my little hand in his But now they had greatly altered and grown old and wrinkled

Each morning he went down to the solitary tree as he had always done the one he worshipped and then he began the day s work This was in the early morning light before the sun had risen for it rises late among these high mountains though the sky is bright long before

A little later I took the path to the spring down in the valley the sacred spring It was so restful and peaceful to stand there and look into it it filled me with devotion and I returned calm strengthened and in my own way happy

So our life flowed by Spring came the country round our place was beautiful and so was all that mighty valley

One morning as I was walking down the path I saw a man bending over the spring and drinking from his hand I remember that while I was still some dis-

tance away I noticed that he drank from his left hand His back was turned to me yet I saw that this was someone I didn t know and I slackened my pace thinking to wait a little before going on But he had heard me and looked up He was quite young a good ten years younger than I was his face was fresh and frank and deeply browned by the sun When I looked at it more closely there eemed something familiar about it And he too seemed to know me He rose and when I came up to him I found that like me he was from this valley and that I d seen him sometimes as a child though that was long ago He was now a man of twenty five or thirty not very tall but broad and powerful and full of health But he had only one arm

He recognised me too although it was many years since he had seen me Our homes were not far apart His parents like mine leased a small piece of land from the temple they were poor people—perhaps even poorer than we for they had many children

We chatted togeth r He told me he had been away for some years as a soldier having set forth when he was little more than half grown because there were so many of them at home Then he had lost an arm in the war and that was why he had come back He was no good at war now he said smiling and it didn t matter He hadn t liked it but a man had to do something The best work of all was tilling the soil if one had any But for that too one really needed two arms

Then he asked about me and I told him that mother had died and that I now kept house for father

Aren t you married then? he asked

No I answered hesitating a little

Then we talked about the spring I told him how I went to it every morning because my mother had taught me to and because it was very holy Yes he knew that he said and the water was sweet Not even the Castalian spring was so good and such crowds went there that one couldn t get near it He had longed for this water all the years he was away He had returned the evening before and come down here first thing this morning to taste it

And he knelt down and drank again as if he could never have enough

Won t you drink? he said

I hesitated and then knelt beside him and we both drank the cold clear water from our hands There was nothing extraordinary about this and yet I felt that it was a singular act we were performing together Afterwards our faces were reflected side by side in the water which soon lay still again I don t know whether he saw how the grains of sand in one corner were being slowly stirred round and round Perhaps not but he said

Nowhere else in the world can there be such glorious water as this It must indeed be a holy spring

We rose and parted He was going to wander about

the countryside he said and see if he remembered it And with a little smile on his sunburnt face he left me and went his way down the valley

I took the path home slowly and without turning round though now and then I wondered which way he was going

Did he know that I was a pythia? Perhaps not?

Next morning I went there as usual I lingered perhaps a little longer than usual He came at last and I found that I was glad of his coming It was a strange thing to notice to feel

We talked again He said that yesterday he had been right down to the river at the very bottom of the valley and had enjoyed going there again He was astonished to hear that I had never been there I ought to go he said it was not far and not terribly steep if one knew the right places We might go there together some time he added as if it were something quite natural

When he had drunk from the spring we sat down beside it and he told me of his soldiering life in countries unknown to me He thought it was fine to be home again but he did not care for Delphi It was a city of rogues and all the women were venal

But it has a glorious temple I said

Yes of course he answered. But that was all he said I couldn t make out whether or not he knew that I was a pythia And anyhow what did it matter—why was I so curious about it?

If he didn t know now he soon would

We talked together as if we d known each other a long time and were old friends But now and then we looked at each other not knowing what to say nor quite knowing what it was we had been talking about

The sun was some way above the mountain when we parted and I went home

On the third morning—for I remember I counted them though only half-consciously—on the third morning I got ready as soon as father had gone out to work and I remember thinking how queer it was to feel my heart beating while I did so As I came down the path I soon saw that he was already sitting there at the usual place and I felt suddenly very happy as I walked along through the morning light which was not yet real light but would soon become so—would soon *blossom out in full sunshine over all the valley He heard* me while I was still a long way off and turned and sat smiling at me as I drew near And when I reached him and drank from the spring he knelt down at my side though he had drunk already and drank again from his hand which was sunbrowned and broad and the back of it very hairy When we had finished we remained on our knees looking at each other and all at once without a word he put his hand behind my head and drew it to him and kissed me Our lips were cold from the chilly spring water but grew gradually warmer —they grew warmer and warmer and at last they were

burning hot I felt his broad wet hand at the back of my neck and I heard myself panting and my heart thudding within me And when at last his lips left mine I heard him saying in his calm voice but as if at a distance Why do you shut your eyes?

I had not known I was doing it I opened my eyes and saw his smiling sunburnt face close to mine—saw it come nearer again until I saw it no longer but only felt his strong lips on mine which were parted and waiting for them

Afterwards we did not speak but only held each other s hand It was the first time I had held his hand in mine—his beloved hand which I so well remember even now

We were both breathing hard when we got up and stood side by side

Shall we go down to the river together? he said gravely You ve never been there

I just pressed his hand and looked at him For it no longer seemed at all strange that he should ask me and that we should go there together

We sped downhill and presently when the slope steepened he found a place not too difficult for me though it was not easy either at the rate we were going and with me so new to it But at the worst places he helped me took my body and held me until I regained my footing on the rocky slopes where roots of stone-pines ran everywhere The ground became wilder and

more precipitous and from below rose the murmur of the river growing louder and louder until it rushed and thundered The valley bottom narrowed it grew as narrow and shut-in as a crevasse and the daylight withdrew until at last it was no more than twilight filled with the stunning thunder of the torrent The pines hid the river from us but we should soon see it But when at last breathless and hot with exertion we reached it we quite forgot this river that we had come to see—we never looked at it we saw only each other thought of nothing but ourselves and of sinking into each other s embrace down there in the darkness where none could see us where all that was done was done in secret And we sank upon the ground and with my eyes closed I felt him tear the clothes off me and come into me

For the first time I experienced love—the marvel of not being alone of another person being in me The marvel of embracing another and being myself embraced and of feeling a profound wild satisfaction in my powerful body which without always knowing it had always longed for this

Meanwhile I heard the roar of the river about me smelt the fragrance of the soft carpet of pine-needles on which I lay and which those good trees for untold years untold summers had been preparing for me I would always associate this scent of pine-needles and this dull roar with love as it was for me

I did not want to open my eyes and I had no need to knowing that my beloved was with me that my happy body rested limply with him in his strong arm which was hard—so comforting and sweet to rest in And I felt his hand his left hand stroke my face it was queer to feel it, but I loved to feel it and I had never been caressed before by any hands at all and never would be caressed by any other one than this than his

This was human happiness this was what it was to be a human being I was as happy as such beings can be I was just like one of them

When at last we had had our fill of each other we climbed up again towards the daylight towards the sunlight towards the full radiant sunshine that now reigned over the whole valley By the spring which lay there as still as if nothing had happened we parted from one another and happy I went home

When I reached the doorpost of the house I grasped it with my still hot hand and stood leaning against it for a little while full of my happiness

Later when I was preparing the meal for father to eat when he came in from the fields I began to think it had been very wrong of us to forget the river and not even to look at it Perhaps it was angered because of that—because we had not prayed beside it and purified ourselves in it before abandoning ourselves to our love Because we had thought only of ourselves Perhaps this was an offence for which we should be punished There

is no river which is not divine this one by its mighty roar showed us that it was and perhaps it was angry with us I could still hear its menacing thunder it seemed to me and now in my solitude it frightened me

Rivers do not easily forgive as we all know And god

God? God? Would he forgive me this that I had done? I belonged to him I was his bride

Yes truly But I was human too I was a human being a woman like all other women This was what I had felt and experienced with such unutterable joy A joy and a happiness which I had never dreamt of Which had been stolen from me—by whom?

I was chosen by god I was god s elect But I was also chosen by the life of this earth by ordinary human life to live it I was chosen by love by a man who loved me who wanted to possess me and whom I wanted to possess I was his bride God s bride—and his

No I didn t want to think of this I wanted to think only of how happy I was Of that alone Of nothing but that

But it was god himself who had given me these disturbing thoughts which I now thrust from me And he would return with them and never leave me in peace I didn t know that then I never dreamt how much reason I had to be troubled on my own account and on my beloved s—I never dreamt what was awaiting us menacing us

We knew not what we did when we hurried down into the gorge to the rushing river

I tried to immerse myself in my tasks and think of nothing else But they needed no thought—my hands performed them without my mind My hands which but now had caressed

To hold his head between them was most wonderful What was as precious as the head of the beloved to kiss his lips warm—hot—and see his gaze plunge into mine

I wonder what my own eyes were like as he looked into them they must have been like those of one drowning

If it was found out what would happen? What frightful thing would happen to us both? But it had been done in secret and no one knew of it That is the river knew And god knew God knew!

And it would happen again It would happen again and again my body cried out for it and would never stifle its cry my mouth longed to shout it out across the mountains over all mountains What would come of it? I feared nothing! Love fears nothing My only dread was that my beloved that my beloved might

Did he know Did he know that I was a pythia the priestess and bride of god And if he came to hear of it would he like everyone else—would he then

No I would think of nothing but my happiness My

present happiness my happiness now this day I would think of myself down there among the kindly trees on their carpet of fragrant needles resting among them on his arm his hard arm that was so safe to rest in Yes with him there was safety safety at last If only god would let me keep it—he who could never be safety No he could not one had to understand that and I understood But to a mortal to one who was no more than human safety might surely be vouchsafed two lovers might surely find it in each other s embrace I too might find it at last in my beloved s embrace I who had longed for it so much

I prayed to god I remember—prayed that he would let me be happy and find peace in love in the earthly love that now filled me

I did not know I never dreamed that what I prayed for in my innermost heart was something he could never think of granting something out of all reason for him to give me up

Our happiness must have blinded me to the unreasonableness of my prayer and to the impossibility of its being heard We dwelt blindly in our love abandoning ourselves to it with only faint misgivings I alone was troubled at times my beloved never It was not in his nature He belonged to reality to the earth to real life and he feared nothing beyond That he as well as I had reason to do so never crossed his mind

No happily we knew nothing nothing at all

We loved each other sought each other as often as we could whenever we had the chance Secretly for so it had to be—but that only increased our ardour We loved each other wherever we happened to be but always in the open like the animals like all nature We were constrained to do this but we wanted it too it suited us as we were and as our love was homeless and happy Never indoors like other people but out in the wind and rain and sun. When desire came upon us I remember that we would hide in a cornfield to possess one another and lie there unseen with our love Only the eagles hovering high above the valley saw us I remember once that summer that the grain bloomed and smoked above us as we became one in the sunshine I remember the smell of the corn and how the air quivered about us in the summer heat

But never again would I go down to the river Sometimes he thought we should for there we should be most hidden And he wondered why I didn t want to But I never told him

I had had enough of that roar that distant but menacing din which was for ever linked with my love I could never experience love without hearing that sound. Even up in the daylight—yes in the midst of our happiness in the cornfield—I seemed to hear the muffled roar of the river round me Or perhaps within me?

I kept my troubled thoughts to myself and he knew

nothing of them They came upon me mostly when I was working in the house alone with plenty of time for every kind of thought Then I would be filled with a dull unease a vague dread of what the future might have in its womb Its womb? Once I remember when I was looking for something—something quite different —I came upon my bridal gown I hid it away quickly Afterwards I walked about that lonely house in a ferment full of flying thoughts

If only I could talk to him—to my beloved—about what was weighing on my mind how much easier it would be If I could share it with him Often I thought of confiding in him—asking him if he knew if he knew who I was But I dared not My love was all too precious to me and I could not bear to lose it I possessed it now but if I opened my heart to my beloved might I not lose him? It had happened to many If I told him who I was

But he must surely know it already he could not but know it So then I might just as well

In the end I did tell him

And it turned out that he knew I had been priestess of the oracle when he was a child and perhaps still when he left home as a young boy but he thought I had given it up long ago after only a few years as others did *He was astonished that I was still a pythia—that I was one now* Since his return he had not wanted to talk to anyone about me so as not to betray our

secret, and therefore he had heard nothing No more than what I myself had told him that I kept house for my father I saw that he did not quite know what it meant to be priestess of the oracle or what it involved He had been absent from Delphi for so long and anyway he had never cared about such things—he never troubled his head about them he said But he could not conceal his amazement that I was still there—that I was so deeply bound to god He said nothing outright but I saw that it made him thoughtful

I felt relieved that he should take it like this I was not to lose him then He attached little importance to my being a pythia he was the first person not to regard me as something queer and avoid me because of it He had known it all the time—though not that I was a pythia still He had known yet loved me so much! What better proof could there be of how little it mattered to him!

Had I not reason to be thankful and happy? I had told him everything and he had understood me and my uneasiness Yes though I had said nothing about uneasiness in so many words And now I was uneasy no longer He had understood it all as a lover does

I stroked his hand which was so dear to me and at last I remember that I kissed it We parted with many kisses and smiles as we always did

Next time we were together everything was as before I believe that never since the very first time

had I embraced him with such passion my love for him was ardent and thankful as never before and I wanted to show it to give it him to give him me me—all that a woman in love can give with her body her devotion her desire And he received it and gave himself again But perhaps he was a little surprised at my vehemence He caressed me afterwards very gently I remember almost as if he wanted to calm me

We didn t talk about it this time we both avoided it And we hardly ever spoke of it again I noticed a certain unwillingness in him to touch on the subject nor did I want to now that I had confided in him and all was well

Yes everything was as before except that my love was even hotter now and meant even more to me I *could not help showing how infinitely much it meant* to me how I clung to it how overmastering was my need of it Perhaps I showed it all too plainly

His love was steadier calmer like everything else about him that was why I loved him so He loved me in his calm strong fashion and would certainly never fail me but the violence of my passion seemed not to increase his love for me and his desire. Indeed it sometimes appeared to make him a little shy of me—just as he seemed shy of recalling what I had told him of myself who I was and that I really belonged to god. He seemed almost to withdraw a little from me and because I thought I detected this he became more

necessary than ever I clung to him yet more ardently more breathlessly—I would never let him go! And although I was no longer afraid of losing him—for I wasn t at all—I clung to him as if I thought I might as if I had something to fear I had nothing at all to fear and yet I went on doing it I rubbed oil into my face quite needlessly to soften my skin and take away my wrinkles though I had none Although I looked fresh and not at all old—no older than he—nevertheless I did it And when one morning he was not at the spring I was frantic with despair Shamelessly I betrayed my insatiable desire for him showing him how blatantly brazenly I loved him and when I did so my eyes must indeed have been like those of one drowning but I no longer cared—I let him look into them I hid nothing I did not wish to hide anything

My passion was like a savage chasm that sought to engulf him And I saw that it frightened him

Yes my love was too great Too much love cloys the beloved but that I didn t know or understand If I had known it would have made no difference For who can determine the degree of loving?

He recoiled before this excess this wild conflagration that was so foreign to him and his world—to the security and reality in which he lived It was this very safety that I loved—and loved it so mordinately that I lost it—so ardently that I was bound to lose it No my love was of the wrong kind it did not belong there In

spite of everything I did not belong to this world the real world of men I was not meant for it

His embrace was safety and was sweet to rest in But I was not meant for safety I became a stranger in it for I loved it far too much

But he did not cast me off He was as good to me as before and we used to have long talks together sitting hand in hand When I pressed myself against him and he knew I longed for him I could see that he would rather have drawn back and that I aroused in him no real desire yet at times he did as I wished and endured my violence and ardour which he could no longer share That he did this out of kindness was the bitterest thing of all Bitter too to be forced to acknowledge in one s heart how little love has to do with kindness

Yes he was very good to me and it was strange to feel how gently his strong hand could caress and how love died away in it as it did so

Thus it was between us when the fatal thing happened when the message came summoning me to the temple The oracle was to be opened again a long line of feast days and great crowds of pilgrims awaited me

On that last evening I was in despair and could not hide it He asked me the reason several times but I would not tell him—could not bring myself to tell him I parted from him in tears utterly distraught

Next morning I took out my bridal gown and without a word to my father I stole up the path towards

Delphi It was still dark and I shivered under the cold stars I did not love god I loved someone else But he did not care about me I was quite alone

Down in the holy of holies I felt his presence—the presence of him I had betrayed His breath came roughly to meet me drugging me he seemed to snatch at me The cave was full of him of his spirit and the air was heavy and stifling to breathe The little venomous oracle-snakes were out already darting their cloven tongues after me and from the cleft that ran to the realms of death the poisonous sickly fumes rose up to me and before I was seated on the tripod I felt almost stunned by them Never have I come so swiftly into his power to be wiped out and made his alone it was as if he had been waiting to hurl himself upon me He seized m by the throat as if to strangle me—squeezed it tight—and horrible noises were forced out through it It was sheer horror and terror without respite or delight never have I known such anguish never had he treated me so savagely with such utter fury but never had he brought me to such a pitch of frenzied ecstasy They said afterwards that my body had been hurled back and forth and that my shrieks had been heard right out in the temple It was appalling But what frightened me most was that in the middle of it all through it all from far away I seemed to hear the muffl d roar of the river Was it true? Did I really hear it? And why should it have filled me with such terror?

Afterwards as I lay recovering in the house of the old woman who had care of me and resting from my dreadful exhaustion the little oracle-servant came and sat beside me He had felt uneasy about me and wanted to see how I was He said he had never seen my face so terrifying as it was this time The priests had thought the same and talked about it among themselves They were much pleased with me—with this violent possession by god But he added cautiously that perhaps I need not give myself so completely to god—that god could not require it of me A faint smile must have appeared on my weary face as I listened with closed eyes to his solicitous words though he never noticed it

He spoke of god Of his god Why did I smile at that?

Then I heard him mention an unknown man who had come rushing down the stairs from the pilgrims hall into the holy of holies and had stared at me with horror-stricken eyes It could not have been anyone from Delphi for no one from these parts would have attempted anything so mad so strictly forbidden. The priests of the oracle had been outraged he was driven forth at once and handed over to the temple guard. No one knew what his punishment would be perhaps they would just let him go

It was a strange incident to be sure but I hardly heard what he was saying—until he mentioned that he thought the man had only one arm

I sat up abruptly and my manner must have been very strange for the little servant looked at me in astonishment He couldn t make out why I was suddenly so changed But seeing that I was not going to lie and rest any longer he was satisfied that there was nothing seriously wrong with me He need not be anxious Smiling all over his friendly face he left me

I remained alone with my conflicting thoughts Why had he come? I did not understand What reason had he? Could it mean that somehow he   that he cared about me?

Something like a faint hope began to stir in me though there were no grounds for it

Slowly I took off the bridal robe put on my ordinary clothes and set off down to the valley

I found the house empty and went out again to stray at random through the fields Then I saw him at work on a piece of land cultivated by his father and went over to him He stared a little when he caught sight of me and I noticed something shy in his look which as a rule was the most candid look one could meet His eyes would not meet mine when I came up to him We both stood silent

I understood He had seen me—seen the horror that was my face when I belonged to god—seen what no one can endure to see and what no one can ever forget once he has beheld it For him I was now the pythia the possessed for him as for everyone else Now he was like everyone else Now everything was over

I asked him and he answered frankly that it was so He would never get over it And I understood that what he meant was that no man could love a woman whom he had seen thus whom he had seen possessed by god

Then he told me that he had come to the spring that morning and waited for me When I didn t appear he grew anxious remembering how strangely distraught I had been the evening before and he began to think that something must have happened to me He went up to our house and found it empty and even more agitated he sought out my father in the fields but father didn t know where I was either and was surprised to hear that I wasn t at home Hesitating and reluctant as if it were something he would rather not speak of he admitted that I might be up in Delphi at the temple of the oracle Hearing this he hurried up there and while still in the entrance hall he had heard my wild shrieks as if people were hurting me he dashed through the temple into the pilgrims hall whence the cries seemed to be coming and down the stairs And here he broke off

I took his hand

Were you so anxious about me?

Yes

You needn t be any more Never again I will show you how much I love you

He understood what I meant that I would now do for him the utmost and last that any lover can do

release him so that he would never need to see me again We would part now he should live in his world and I in mine as we ought always to have done

We stood for a long time looking at the ground and avoiding each other s eyes And I held his hand but not tightly enough to remind him of how much I loved him or how hard a struggle I was having now And so we parted for ever

Although we lived quite near to each other we never met again it was clear that he was avoiding me thinking it best for us both I thought so too and was grateful to him

Whenever I did not have to be up at Delphi I lived as before with my father amid the same scenery in the same valley as the man from whom I had parted It was late summer now and everything seemed scorched —the whole of that mighty landscape seemed scorched —fields woods and all Only the spring was changeless as full as ever of its limpid water because it was divine The grains of sand in one place were still stirred by an invisible finger I still went down to it in the mornings as I used to do and sat there for a little alone with my thoughts But I never mirrored my face in it. I never wanted to see my face again I just sat there gazing out into empty space which was growing paler and more autumnal And when with closed eyes I had drunk of the water a few times I turned home again.

He must surely have gone there every day too for

like me he loved that fresh water and could not do without it But he came at another time of day when he knew I would not be there He could trust me not to be there then

But once I spied him at a distance gathering olives in a little grove that belonged to his father s holding I recognised him from the difficulty he was having in keeping the branch still while he plucked the olives Unknown to him I stood watching him for a long time as he stretched his one arm up into the old tree and gathered its fruit I could not see his face but I recognised him At last I sank down upon the ground and lay there weeping weeping

When I came home I sat down with my face in my hands to think about him for I was alone If only I could have helped him hold the branch while he picked! If I could have lived with him on earth here in the valley a long and happy human life As mother had lived as so many many others had been allowed to live Why couldn t I? Why couldn t I be like the rest?

That was the last time I saw him though I didn t know it then

Not long afterwards it happened that I was carried out of the oracle-pit unconscious violated by god No one knew this they knew only that he had filled me as never before that my ecstasy my frenzy was measureless and that I should have fallen from the

tripod had not the little oracle-servant noticed it and caught me in his arms

What happened was that just as I was losing consciousness I smelt a sour stench of goat and the god in the shape of the black goat his sacred beast in the cave of the oracle threw itself upon me and assuaged itself and me in a love act in which pain evil and voluptuousness were mingled in a way that revolted me How could I feel delight? But I did I did though afterwards it filled me with revulsion and self disgust Was it because I had lost my beloved and had been forsaken by him for ever and because my yearning for him was boundless? Was that the reason? But with loathing I felt that not he but a stranger possessed me mastered me —a wild and terrible power which stunned me with its ruthless enormity And simultaneously with this power there was also somehow the he-goat of the oracle-pit with its vil stench While it was going on I heard the mighty roar of the river as never before it mounted and mounted grew more violent and filled me in the midst of my lusting with a pain and terror beyond compare

Then I swooned right away and knew nothing more until I woke up in the house of the old woman who slunk about me with ingratiating malice in her inquisitive observant eyes I begged her to leave me alone and at last reluctantly and suspiciously she did so I could think and suffer my torment in peace I lay there

for a long time and had not the strength to set off home before the evening

Did it happen at the same time? It s impossible to say It was next day that they found him drowned and shattered in the river but it must have happened the day before for it was then he left home in the morning —the morning this ordeal of mine took place How it had come about no one knew nor what he was doing down there He had no reason to go down into that dark gorge *They did not know that he had a reason—that* he had been summoned there to his destruction—that he had been drawn there by an invisible power which sought to destroy him to devour him Had he been drowned or had he perished in the rapids from his injuries? Perhaps he had been struck senseless and then died in the river though there was less water in it now Had he lain there unconscious like me at its mercy? Who knew? They found him lying outstretched on his back just beneath the surface fully visible when they came to look for him

That he had fallen was evident for in his one hand he still clutched a twig which they supposed he had grasped to save himself But the strange thing was that it was a twig of the god s own tree though no laurels grew in that narrow cleft It seemed to them odd but they thought no more about it knowing nothing of what had really happened—of its true inwardness They did not know that it was god s vengeance on

human happiness and on his elect who had betrayed him and had not been willing to live for him alone

Those who found him said he lay as if sleeping but bereft of colour bleached—he who had had all the fresh colours of health His body was covered with bloodless wounds All the blood had been carried away by the river It was the river that had taken him It had taken everything

I never saw him myself how could I? Many others saw him for his strange death attracted a good deal of attention Many saw him who had no interest in him save for the singular manner of his death But not I My love prevented me for it might have betrayed itself and become known I could not go to his home to which they had carried him lest I should arouse surprise and perhaps suspicion in his parents I barely knew them I could do nothing Nothing but weep in solitude when father could not see me He never noticed that I had wept he never suspected anything He never had throughout the time our love had lasted But it was from him I learned of my beloved s death and of how they had found him—learned what everyone else knew because for a time everyone in the valley was talking about it

Soon it was forgotten He was not well known in his native place having been so long away from it He had never worked there or been in company with the others And now he was dead He would never own any land

of his own to cultivate with his one arm as he had so longed to do

But I did not forget him I mourned him until I seemed torn to tatters and as if through his death I had *lost life itself* although by that time he didn t belong to me at all—I had lost him before then and lost my life when his love died. I was losing nothing now But I couldn t help thinking of him who had given me everything and then taken everything away —who in his boundless goodness had allowed me to live

I have never forgotten him and I never shall although it s all so long ago—although it s so far away that one might think I would see it only through a haze But I see him before me as alive as if he had never had to die

How strange it is to sit here and remember him again and remember the only real life I ever lived.

It was a hard time for me And it was hard to hide my sorrow No one must be allowed to guess that anything had happened to plunge me into despair But because I had the lifelong habit of dissembling shutting myself in I think I succeeded and that no one noticed anything No one but the old woman up in Delphi She had a wide knowledge of human nature because she so disliked people and everything to do with them it sharpened her eyes and nothing escaped her

Some time in late autumn my monthly flow failed to appear and I began to be haunted by the thought

that I might be with child It filled me with dread and with a wonderful budding joy What this would do to my life—if I lived at all—I had no idea But in my heart I felt a joy which was quite independent of this I was filled with an exaltation so soft that no ear could hear it—no one outside myself could have heard it—which whispered of a marvel—whispered softly but persistently ceaselessly of something unheard-of a triumph over death itself Over the death of love and over death itself I had to sit quite motionless with closed eyes to take it in to sense my body s quiet rejoicing at its victory But I heard ah I heard it clearly! My love was not dead it lived on within me! My beloved was not dead he was within me once more! He had not forsaken me would never forsake me never again

My love had conquered at last And I had won him back

It was a happiness so great that it was impossible to see how I could go about among people without their suspecting it—that I could keep such a thing secret But the very fact that it was my own well-guarded secret—that it was going on inside me without anyone guessing at it—only made my happiness greater and more wonderful and the miracle rarer

I was afraid certainly Sometimes I thought of what lay before me with anxiety even terror But I did not quite know how it would be—I could not picture it—

it was half unreal for in a sense there was no future for me any more I was without a future and thereby marvellously free and released from fear How could I fear anything in my present condition—the condition we call blessed? My quiet inward jubilation drowned every other sound—all dread all fear all terror—and turned my peril into something scarcely real I lived only in the reality which I bore within me For me that was all *there* was

Winter came and with it my pregnancy advanced like spring like early summer carefree though all nature seemed dead free from any kind of care No one noticed for so far there was nothing to see Although so great a miracle was coming to pass no one could see what was happening to me

Where the old woman was concerned however I was not so sure and I wondered about it more and more She was as amiable as ever as amiable as she always was to everyone But she often looked at me curiously observing me as only women can observe each other It was unpleasant and it worried me But I had always disliked her looking at me I reminded myself And she said nothing gave no hint that she knew or guessed anything She just looked at me in that curious way

A time would come when I should realise why her look had always made me feel like that—when I should know that she was always watching me that it was indeed her duty to do so though a very congenial

duty that she was to some extent responsible for the pythia and must know all about her and spy on her or this chosen one who through her close ties with god was so important to the temple and to all Delphi that she must supervise her conduct and report everything however trivial to the priesthood And this she was more than willing to do

There was seldom anything to report beyond the usual gossip in which only she was interested but now she had something to tell which so far as she knew had never happened before—something which they would listen to at last with amazement and horror Something about *me* of whom to her annoyance she had never before had anything to tell

When at last she was sure that I was with child she must have wondered how it could have come about I was as solitary as anyone could be never seeing a soul either man or woman except my old father To this day I can t make out how she discovered the secret of our love I thought it belonged to us two alone and could never be touched by the impure thoughts and words of others But suddenly one day through her the priests and the whole city knew of my unspeakable offence against god against the temple and sacred Delphi they knew that I was with child and that the father was the man who had been found dead down in the river—who had already had the punishment he deserved—and that this was the same one-armed man

who had tried to force his way into the holy of holies and desecrate it, perhaps to rob the god of his property his priestess just when she was filled with his spirit

God had judged him already But I remained The guiltier criminal remained For he had been an ordinary mortal while I was chosen by the divine to be used by it for its own purposes and to serve it devotedly faithfully and with perfect self abnegation. And the fact that I had done so and that since first becoming a pythia as a young girl I had lived only for the temple and god and had been regarded by all as almost part of the oracle that I was reputed to be so dearly beloved by god that he would speak through no one else and that this reputation of mine benefited the holy place and with it all Delphi—all this made my guilt the blacker my fall the deeper the sudden hatred of me the more savage That *I* should have outraged and deceived god, failed him forsaken him for an earthly man was an incredible crime an infamy without parallel

I was brought before a council of the senior priests who asked me whether what the old woman said was true From what they knew of me and from the good opinion they had formed of me as a priestess of the oracle throughout all these years of service in the temple it seemed to them utterly beyond belief It was plain that they wanted it not to be true But I admitted it at once indeed it must have been evident that I was glad

to be carrying a child and it amazed and outraged them more than ever They talked excitedly among them selves about this extraordinary unheard-of event and about the harm it would do to the prestige of the oracle and they said that by rights I ought to be hurled over the cliff from which desecrators of the temple were usually thrown though I realised that they were not going to sentence me to that Then they turned to me and talked about god and the fearful crime I had committed against him and then more about the dis honour I had brought upon the temple and the oracle and all Delphi They ended by saying that god required the sternest of punishments to be inflicted upon me and that this would be decided upon in the course of the day

Nevertheless it was not they who sentenced me for through their delay my fate was determined by others

The rumour that I had confessed and that the tale was true ran through the city like wildfire and turbulent mobs gathered outside the old woman s house where as they knew I was awaiting my sentence They were armed with sticks and stones and they yelled that I must die I could see them through the window I could see they were the kind to carry out their threats Their faces were horrible in their insensate hatred their mob malignity Inside the house the old woman padded about with ill-concealed gloating in her rat-grey face pretending to be alarmed on my account and at the

same time protesting that she would be responsible for me no longer that I must go—go out to them that s to say so that they could kill me Never by a sign did she admit that it was she who had informed against me and I did not care to tell her that I knew perhaps she thought I didn t She may even have felt guiltless of my fate—of what was now to befall me—for she always regarded herself not only as a righteous but as a very kind person who never said a bad word about anyone though all around her were mean and false and wicked in every way

The yells and threats grew wilder and the priests did nothing they never interfered but seemed glad to leave my sentence to the mob and escape having to deal with me themselves My situation there in that house with the furious murderous crowd outside and the grey slinking poisonous creature in the room behind me was vile and horrible and I felt no hope of ever getting out of it alive

It was then that my only friend came the little servant of the oracle He ran in breathlessly in his slapping sandals and urged me to hide in the temple—to take refuge there for it was holy ground where no one could do anything to me for I would be under god s protection The old woman was indignant at this suggestion—at the mere thought of the sanctuary being used for such a purpose or of god protecting a lecherous woman like me a woman who had betrayed him.

Little wonder if she was outraged at the idea she was thinking of the good name of the temple which lay so near her heart of the sacred place which she felt appointed to guard and which was the apple of her eye although she hardly ever set foot in it Was it really to be used in this way and would I perhaps escape punishment altogether? Never before had I seen any evil in her face—in that dead grey face which I now beheld for the last time—but now she could conceal her nature no longer

The little oracle servant noticed nothing however and dragged me away in an attempt to save my life The woman s house stood so close to the temple that it might be possible to slip from one to the other before the mob spied me The people were massed before the house but at one end there was a way out which they might have forgotten We slipped out so quickly that no one saw us but when we ran up the steps into the temple we were seen of course and a wild yelling broke out behind us The mob rushed after us and in a few moments they had filled the whole stairway By then we had come through the colonnade and into the temple itself and I still remember that in spite of the danger and excitement the first thing my friend thought of was to take off his sandals and to see that I did the same a thing I should certainly have forgotten otherwise It was so like him—god s little friend and mine—to remember first and foremost that this was a

holy place That was why we were safe If we really were? The mob seemed to have no veneration for the sacred room they poured into it screeching and I only just escaped by running further into the interior of the temple They screamed like lunatics saying that they would rid god of this scum this whore of a priestess who had dishonoured him and their city

But all at once the gentle kindly little oracle-servant altered in a way I could not have imagined. In a loud firm voice which I had never before heard from him he declared that this was god s holy place and that whoever dared to force his way into it should die the death and by the hand of the avenging god himself Anyone who sought sanctuary in here stood under god s mighty protection.

Didn t they know that? he exclaimed in a fury and the rabble with all their hot repulsive faces recoiled before him in fear for what he said was well known to all and no one could doubt its truth. They moved out again into the colonnade but because it seemed to him that some were not moving fast enough he angrily seized his broom which was standing by the entry and swept them out as if they were the dirt which it was his duty to clear away since he was appointed by god to keep his sanctuary clean

Having expelled them all he stayed in the colonnade to make sure they did not try to come in again He must have succeeded for no one appeared and it was

now almost quiet I heard no more than a sustained murmur and now and then a single shout

I was alone in the temple Alone under god s protection He had not denied it me he had not quite forgotten that I was his He received me into his embrace And into his radiant embrace in his temple up in the daylight In the temple of his glory where I had never been permitted to serve him He received me there at last

It was most strange In this desperate hour when the mob were waiting outside to assault me and perhaps take my life I was filled with stillness and solemnity—now at last he filled me with the serenity of his whole being for which I had so often prayed but which he had never before vouchsafed me Now at last I felt the safety for which I had so besought him now at last he let me rest in his embrace. I knew it would only be for a little while—it could not be for long for my fate was sealed Yet I was deeply happy

I looked about me with the same reverence and joy as when I had stood here with my mother and beheld his dwelling-place for the very first time believing that it was here that I was to serve him Of course that could not be But now he received me here in his true sanctuary and gave me shelter and safety in my hour of mortal danger And I felt how near he was to me—closer perhaps than ever before—not as heat and fire but rather as light I felt his light pouring over my face

so that my eyes which I kept closed for very happiness were scalded by tears

Now this cruel inscrutable god was shedding all his light and all his peace upon me now when all was over and I was to leave his temple for ever Now for a while he bestowed upon me his serenity his safety For a little time while hoarse voices shouted for me outside and penetrated the stillness of the temple came the peace he was giving me at last

I have never forgotten that hour Never ceased to be thankful for it But neither have I ever understood why he is like that why things need be as they are

Was it because of this that having recovered and summoned up all my strength I was able to leave the temple though the mob were still outside watching for me and desiring nothing more than that I should leave my refuge? I don t know what made me do so—perhaps an impulse from god or on the contrary some inner defiance of him a self assertion a challenge to this ruthless enigmatic deity Or perhaps quite simply pride a contempt for death and for the rabble outside Whatever it was I determined to leave my sanctuary and go out to meet my fate were it life or death In any case I could not have stayed in the temple for ever and would have had to go in the end

When the little *servant* saw me putting on my sandals again he was dismayed for he guessed what I meant to do Whispering he tried to dissuade me from anything

so mad But I had made up my mind and for all his entreaties I would not relent

To their amazement I stepped into the colonnade and out on to the steps They were too much astonished to do anything—even to shower abuse upon me—they simply stared and drew back It was as if when at last I showed myself—when they actually saw me—I terrified them as I had terrified them during my life as a pythia —and more than any other priestess of the oracle because I was believed to have been specially chosen by god and filled and possessed by him as no one else had ever been And now although he had curs d me they may have thought that his power remained in me if only as a frightful malediction It ied them held them back and not one of th ome near me I think they were frightened very fact that I dared to the temple of my own free will st unde ordinary person wou a thing iethin not human

They sto url the th had no gr ut th their eyes fe

And wh th temple cou made way of savage dared not

away now began to shout and yell and soon abuse was hailing down upon me from all sides the foulest names a woman can be given and even mocking comments upon the age at which I had conceived They stopped at nothing in their moral indignation and their rage over the shame I had brought upon the city the temple and god The blow to their livelihood the unprecedented disgrace to Delphi and the oracle might cause *the stream of pilgrims to dwindle away and with it* their income Their faces were blood red with unnatural excitement and to my disgust I recognised many of them for they were all from Delphi no strangers came here at this time of year Men and women jostled one another in this mob of every class and order and women not least my own kind who ought to have understood me better and forgiven me for what had befallen me had happened through love My crime after all was what they too called love

These loathsome faces might have inspired me with enduring hatred for mankind had not reflection shown me that this was not the whole truth about them But just then it was the whole truth and a dangerous and frightful truth it was

The mob followed me and ran alongside me shrieking continued insults and threats But they never touched me they dared not Perhaps this was because I was on the sacred road That too was hallowed ground where no one might be molested and no deed of

violence committed And perhaps something of the fear put into them by the little servant still remained

At a bend in the road I turned for a last glimpse of him my friend the only person who wished me well and there he was on the temple-steps looking after me standing with his broom and weeping It grieved me sorely and I found it hard to keep back my tears Next moment he was hidden from me and at once I felt utterly alone

So I walked along this sacred way where one morning in my first youth—god s glorious morning—I had passed with such rapture arrayed as god s bride and full of my love for him I was walking here now for the very last time and in how different a manner! Threats and revilings were poured upon me and I did not know what lay before me yet strangely enough I was quite calm As calm as I had been in the temple Though now surely it was my own calmness—something I had fought for and won by myself Or was it not?

This calmness of mine in such a situation may also have struck them as unnatural and made them shy of molesting me I believe this was why they dared not use their sticks on me their former pythia—why they shunned even that contact with her and with the power that might still be in her But when the sacred road came to an end—when I had to leave it and try to climb the mountain slopes—there arose such an outcry as was never heard before and a hail of stones fell all about me

Some hit me but not so as to endanger my life and it seemed as if the people were not trying to kill me—as if they dared not—and were content to drive me from the city But one stone struck the back of my neck so hard that I sank to the ground and could hardly get up again After a time I did so and continued up the mountain And they didn t pursue me they stood shrieking their curses at me and warning me never to set foot in Delphi again

When I had come right away from them and out of sight I sat down and breathed more freely I was saved I was bleeding from some wounds especially the one at the back of my neck when I put my hand there it was covered with blood and my body was bruised all over Apart from that I was whole and had come off lightly considering the mortal danger I had been in

What I had dreaded most was that they might so injure me that my child might not reach its full term—that I might be hurt in body or mind in a way fatal to a woman in my condition But I need not have been anxious for nothing of the kind had happened My strong body stood up to this rough treatment which might have broken many another and my mind preserved its serenity If god had had anything to do with *this* serenity and it was not of my own winning I was thankful to him for it It may have helped to save me and through me the child But could it be supposed that god would want to save the child?

The one to whom I chiefly owed my life was the little servant of the oracle Had it not been for him I should never have survived this frightful day I thought when I looked back that evening at what had happened and prepared to spend my first night under the open sky I thought of him still when I had lain down to rest on some leaves I had swept together in a hollow From here no human dwelling was to be seen only the steep mountainsides and between them the stars In this solitude I found that it did me good to think of him my only friend

I had no idea what he really thought about my crime He helped me he saved my life he took my part entirely But what he thought of the act of which I was guilty and which was the cause of all that had happened I never knew We never exchanged a word about it indeed we never had the chance

Probably he simply did not understand that I had committed any offence at all Being incapable of seeing evil in anyone he condemned no one not even me It was not in his nature to do so

But what of his faith in the goodness of mankind? The scenes he had witnessed today which aroused in him such indignation—how would they affect his trust in everything and everyone about him in god and in man? Would they bring his vision of the world toppling about his ears?

No, I hoped that he would soon forget it—forget the

tumult I had caused in his life and go on as before believing the best of everyone as was natural to him That was how he ought to be the little friend of god and man and that was how I preferred to remember him

In that hope I fell peacefully asleep

The cold woke me several times that night and I was glad when at last the sun came to shed a little warmth It was the middle of winter and the nights were really chilly

Yet I remember that it was a mild winter and luckily so for otherwise I could not have survived Even as it was it was bad enough It was difficult to sustain life—difficult to keep from starving and to endure the cold at night I sought shelter in holes or in deserted herdsmen s huts and at first I lived solely on dry half-rotten old berries which I found in the mountains and on the seeds from pine-cones—anything which gave nourishment or seemed to give it I roamed far and wide to find these berries whose names I did not know Then I grew bolder and more enterprising driven to it by hunger and the thought of the child it must live and not be harmed by my starvation There were goats on the mountain and I coaxed them to come to me so that I could milk them I collected the milk in a bowl I had taken from one of the huts and drank it with a desperate greed I became more daring and adroit at stealing milk in this way for nothing could have been better for me and the child than this delicious food. I

even ventured to creep into inhabited huts and steal the herdsmen s cheese and bread I used to lie low among bushes and boulders near by and creep out when they were gone In this way I came by a goatskin to spread over me at night I stole anything and would gladly have committed any crime for the sake of the child his and my child the child of our love the sign that our love was not dead and that it lived on in me that my beloved was still within me

I lived like a savage like a wild animal up there in the mountain I was forced into it having been cast out by men from the life of men and like a tormented gravid beast I shunned no means of keeping myself and the child alive I carefully avoided inhabited places and all to do with mankind for I could expect no good from them And I was always much afraid that the herdsmen would discover me They would hurt me too for they too were men

Nevertheless I was happy during this time Happy in my freedom and in my healthy body which knew that it could live in this way without taking harm which toiled hard but became the stronger for it and the fitter to endure And I was happy in the knowledge that it was his child I carried in me and was to bring forth I felt it living and stirring in me continually and it gave me great joy Despite all hardships anxieties cold and hunger in my loneliness and exile I experienced the measureless happiness of motherhood

And when at last the spring came everything was easier or seemed so I was no longer cold and soon there would be more for me to eat as for other beasts of the field I found juicy herbs which tasted fresh and wholesome though they were not filling and the goats milk was richer than before The goats were not hard to call they came of their own accord to be milked perhaps because they knew me now and perhaps because they liked being milked by a woman Often they followed me and I had to drive them off—chase them right away—for I was afraid that the herdsmen would notice Even animals that had never seen me before sometimes followed me

This was the first time I noticed they were in some way attracted to me though I saw nothing odd about it at the time and thought it quite natural

The hills turned bright with flowers of all kinds and at night I smelt their rich fragrance sick at heart for him who had loved me and bestowed on me the miracle of spring The only spring my body ever had.

If he had lived would he have been with me now—would he have come back to me now that I was no longer a pythia and because I was carrying his child? Would we have shared this life and been happy in it together?

What vain thoughts! He was dead. He lived no longer and would never live again *They had found* him down there in the river pale and bloodless bereft

of life's colour with a twig of the god's own tree in his hand. Thus it was. Thus it would be for ever.

Man's destiny is but one. When it is accomplished nothing remains.

Only the gods have many destinies and need never die. They are filled with everything and experience everything. Everything—except human happiness. That they can never know and therefore they grudge it to men. Nothing makes them so evil and cruel as that men should presume to be happy and forget them for the sake of their earthly happiness. Then they claim their revenge. And put a twig of their tree in their victim's hand.

Now and then on really still nights I thought I could hear the river far below, the river which encompassed our love with its mighty roar and afterwards proved so fatal to us and took so grim a revenge. Now it was spring again, no doubt the waters were running in spate through the narrow gorge and the sound of them may well have carried as far up as this.

For surely I could not have been hearing it only within myself?

No. I distinguished it clearly coming from the gorge. I lay here among the flowers quite alone and heard the river, the cruel river that had carried away the blood of my beloved.

So spring was both a sweet and a sorrowful time for me, as it is for all lovers who are alone. Alone? But I

was not alone! How could I say so? In my womb was my beloved still there our love lived on, conquering death and his own death Conquering even god himself It was perhaps presumptuous to say so nevertheless it was true God had taken his life in vain and in vain had swept his blood away down the river He lived again in me with new blood which I had given him my own heart s blood the blood with which I had loved him love s human blood of which the gods know nothing

So it was So our struggle with god had ended.

And summer came serene summer the season of ripening and fulfilment when nature s womb rejoices The valley ringed by its mighty mountains was a womb full of maturing life and up here too all that could live on these wild slopes lived and throve All was brightness and ease calmness and confidence and I too felt secure and confident though there was much to make me anxious the birth itself how I should manage afterwards how I should feed the child and much else If anyone had reason to dread the future it was surely I but I did not. It was useless to burden myself with that too I was confident and carefree as a woman in my blessed condition should be My sturdy body grew big and shapeless yet I moved almost as nimbly as before because my way of life had been so active and natural throughout. The female animal which must forage for herself while carrying her young brings

forth easily I thought to myself and I believed that I would do so too For I knew nothing about it

The weather grew hotter and summer seemed so far advanced that I thought my time must soon come But it didn t It didn t come and didn t come—nothing happened I was puzzled. The time must have passed but by how long I didn t know I knew when we had been together for the last time—for the very last time But I would not think of that it was more than I could bear I wanted only to remember that I was to bring forth the fruit of our love I wanted only to live in the memory of that love at its most beautiful when it was equally strong in both of us when we so loved each other that we conquered everything Now I was to bear our child our love s child the child of the dead man of the sacrifice I was to bring forth our triumph our victory over death and over all things Over god himself

But I did not bring forth Time passed and passed—and nothing happened.

Summer continued the heat continued and grew more terrible and oppressive and exhausting only the nights brought a little coolness sometimes when a chill came down from the mountains and their eternal snows

I have never known so hot a summer In my condition I suffered especially severely from the heat burdened with my big heavy body which hitherto had not troubled me I had swelled out even more now

I felt I could hardly grow any bigger and that the time must have come for me to be delivered But I was not delivered *It seemed as if I should never bear this child*

But one day as I lay languishing in the heat I felt that *the pains were beginning at last* Slight at first then stronger and after that more violently and at shorter *intervals* The sun scorched down as never before with stabbing red hot rays and the air felt stiflingly heavy *hardly to be breathed* though that may just have been my own fancy Suddenly great sulphur yellow clouds towered up over the *horizon* in the south and rapidly approached For the first time that summer a storm seemed to be on the way Darkness fell over the whole valley and the menacing sharp-edged shadow of the storm-clouds came nearer and nearer Suddenly a lightning flash cut through the clouds visible despite the brightness of the day followed by the dull rumbling of the thunder

I had never thought of this or taken it into account I had expected to bear my child out in the open anywhere but not to need any kind of shelter Where was I to go? I could not lie out in the pouring rain exposed perhaps to the lightning which often struck down here among the mountains

I rose and looked about me There was nothing here to give shelter not so much as a tree and I wandered off at random across the mountainside to search The pains came on again worse than before and because of them

I had to bend forward as I walked and hold myself hard about the belly What would be the end of it? Where should I go to have my child?

It was then that the goats came Goats which I had never seen before and which could not possibly have known me I believe they were wild ones But they seemed to understand what was the matter with me and when I moaned they uttered a whining pitying cry which had a peculiar almost human sound Some of them sprang eagerly up the hillside and down to me again as if wanting to lead me up there It wasn t easy for me to follow them uphill but I did it rather unsteadily as if something were urging me on Sometimes when the pains beset me too severely I had to pause and the beasts seemed to understand for they halted too and waited for me to go on again At last the climb was almost vertical and I thought I could go no further But seeing this they bleated so pitifully that I had not the heart to grieve them and summoning up all my strength I began to climb after them up the steep cliff This evidently pleased them and they gave eager bleats of satisfaction

Behind me I heard the storm approaching the lashing rain moved up from the valley closer and closer the thunder roared over the whole countryside and the cliff which I was climbing and clinging to with hands and feet glimmered in the ever more frequent flashes of lightning

At last utterly exhausted I reached a small plateau—a little place that was more or less level—and just as the rain beat down upon me I spied an opening in the rock before me leading right into the hill The goats were already thronging into it and dazed and reeling I followed them.

The cave was almost dark, at least until one s eyes became accustomed to it and even afterwards it was so dim that I could not see how large it really was But it seemed a fair size and ran on indefinitely into the darkness A sour goat smell came to meet me Then I knew no more and sank to the ground, which was covered with a thick layer of old, dry goat droppings It made a soft bed and to me it was delight unspeakable to sink down upon it.

I must have been unconscious for a time for when I came to myself again all the goats were standing round gazing at me with anxious pitying eyes My awakening gave rise to lively bleatings But when immediately afterwards I was assailed by the most appalling pains—pains of a different kind from the earlier ones I thought—and began screaming wildly they fell quiet and withdrew a little in alarm then they came back and began to cry out as I did uttering strange plaintive cries which though not as loud as my own were in a way even more sorrowful like the sighing of cattle helpless and bestial Yet these creatures made me feel less alone in my suffering They shared it, though they

could express themselves in no other way—in no human way—and for that matter neither could I We had the same language and understood one another well

The pains came now at such short intervals that there seemed hardly any pause between them—just long enough to draw a few breaths—and they were so frightful that the whole cavern resounded to my screams I could not repress my screaming and it relieved me a little too Some of the goats ran to and fro in agitation while others stood still round me as before with outstretched heads lamenting though now they could seldom be heard for my own cries drowned theirs But I saw their muzzles quiver with their frightened bleating and their upper lips moved continuously up and down over their moist, yellowish-white teeth

At the time it never struck me that there was anything strange about the animals behaviour and their preoccupation with me I had no thought for that or for anything else But I was thankful that they were there all about me so that forsaken though I was by god and all mankind I did not have to be quite alone in this hour They were the only beings who cared about me or cared that in my agony I was to bring forth a child

Outside the storm continued and now it was right over us Thunder claps followed close upon one another the rain fell in sheets before the mouth of the cave and

they could come at clearly it was not for my sake they did it to clean me after my delivery but out of desire for the blood itself as if it were of especial value to them I had to fend them off as well as I could with what strength remained to me—to hit out at them at their moist noses

As soon as I was able I took up the baby and found it was a boy I tried to tear the navel-cord and finding I could not I bit it in two and took the child in my arms to keep it from the goats It was now perfectly clean but they would not leave it alone I had to push them and drive them off continually

Their behaviour was incomprehensible to me and I disliked it It seemed to me as strange as it was revolting I staggered up on to my unsteady feet to get out of the place It was ungrateful of me perhaps but I couldn t help it the cave with its acrid stench of goat and its odour of birth nauseated me and I felt I had to get out of it to breathe The storm had ceased so there was no reason to stay if only my strength sufficed to carry me out. With my new-born babe at my breast I reeled over to the entrance and out into the air which was fresh after the rain I had been on the point of fainting but the freshness revived me

Such was my deliverance for which I had so greatly longed. That is how it was

Here the old woman broke off her story She straightened herself then bent forward and fiercely

poked the fire which she had been feeding from time to time with a bit of knotty wood

And what was it I had brought forth? she went on fiercely That creature sitting over there! That was the fruit of all my love—of the highest human happiness—of all our love for each other which began by a holy spring such was its end! Our summer love in the flowering field of corn witnessed by eagles

That was his and my child

I could not make it out It was past understanding As the child grew and revealed itself I pondered more and more but always in vain upon this baffling question how could our love have borne such fruit? It is true that when the child was begotten our love was no longer as happy as it had been Yes at that time the begetter no longer loved Was this the reason? Was it this that drew such punishment with it? So dire a punishment?

But he *had* loved why was the child not conceived then? If we were destined to have a child why did we not have it then in the high noon of our love? Why did I not conceive until the very last when my beloved no longer really loved me when he embraced me without real desire so that his life-sap could not have its proper force? Why was it so? Why did my poor womb not become fruitful until then?

Was it not strange that I had not conceived long before?

Perhaps it hadn't happened until the last time we were together—that last heavy hearted time which brought joy to neither of us

The last time It must have been then for otherwise far too long a time would have passed before the birth Even as it was the period was too long

No I wouldn't think of that! Not of that!

Often the birth came late Or at least sometimes And one never knows quite how to reckon—so many people say that—no there was no sense at all in trying to explain it I didn't want to think about it Not at all And anyway there was nothing to be gained by it. So one might as well leave it alone Let one's thoughts work on something else no matter what But not on anything so pointless and unrewarding

I talked like this to myself persuading myself

What I did not want to think of was that by women's reckoning the time tallied perfectly with the day my beloved was found dead in the river—the day I was raped by god And it was soon after that for the first time in my life that my monthly flow failed to appear And at the time of his death it had been long since my beloved lay with me

But, I thought what am I saying? This is madness And it's impossible—even more impossible

Begotten by god? God's son an idiot who is not even a man A child which if it lives will be a poor idiot without understanding not even knowing that he is

alive an idiot with a meaningless smirk and a mind like a new born baby s

What an idea! That I could even think of such a thing!

That I could suppose for a moment that that horrible monstrous thing in the oracle-pit so savage and inhuman and revolting had given life to the child—given me a child Not my love my great living earthly love but this repulsive thing that I could not recall without the deepest loathing

But of course it was quite impossible A mad notion Strange that such a notion could occur to me

And it was not so terribly long since I had been with my beloved—my so deeply beloved—for the last time He could be the child s father—this child s Of course he could If one wished

Did I wish it? Did I wish

No I couldn t bear to think about it It drove me to despair—despair of life love god everything

God is merciless Those who say he is good do not know him He is the most inhuman thing there is He is wild and incalculable as lightning Like lightning out of a cloud which one did not know contained lightning Suddenly it strikes suddenly he strikes down on one revealing all his cruelty Or his love—his cruel love With him anything may happen He reveals himself at any time and in anything The thunderstorm that drove me into the cave the goats that were sent to take

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alive an idiot with a meaningless smirk and a mind like a new born baby s

What an idea! That I could even think of such a thing!

That I could suppose for a moment that that horrible monstrous thing in the oracle-pit so savage and inhuman and revolting had given life to the child—given me a child Not my love my great living earthly love but this repulsive thing that I could not recall without the deepest loathing

But of course it was quite impossible A mad notion. Strange that such a notion could occur to me

And it was not so terribly long since I had been with my beloved—my so deeply beloved—for the last time He could be the child s father—this child s Of course he could If one wished

Did I wish it? Did I wish

No I couldn t bear to think about it It drove me to despair—despair of life love god everything

God is merciless Those who say he is good do not know him He is the most inhuman thing there is He is wild and incalculable as lightning Like lightning out of a cloud which one did not know contained lightning Suddenly it strikes suddenly he strikes down on one revealing all his cruelty Or his love—his cruel love With him anything may happen He reveals himself at any time and in anything The thunderstorm that drove me into the cave the goats that were sent to take

care of me the scorching summer, charged with unparalleled heat the birth in the goat cave while heaven hurled its lightnings at the earth the queer behaviour of the goats their eager interest in the birth and the baby the vile repugnant inhuman events in the goat-cave—what lay hidden behind all that? Something divine? Something cruelly savagely divine? Was there a mighty deity behind it?

The divine is not human it is something quite different And it is not noble or sublime or spiritualised as one likes to believe It is alien and repellent and sometimes it is madness It is malignant and dangerous and fatal. Or so I have found it And I well know the stench of it—the sour goat-stench—who should know it better than I? It was the first thing I recognised when I entered the cave The cave in which perhaps I bore a son to god a son begotten by the goat god down there in the holy of holies in his pit beneath the glorious temple which is consecrated to him as the god of radiance and light—the temple in which I was never permitted to serve him But I *was* permitted to bring into the world his witless son when for some reason he was to be born an ever leering idiot whom I have had upon my hands all my life

No no What am I saying? I know nothing nothing at all about it. I don t know who is father to this child I didn t know then and I don t know now God s child he cannot be and he cannot be my beloved s h-

bears no likeness either to him or to me—to neither of us he is like no human being and still less like a god I know nothing

But I shake my fist at him who treated me so who used me in this way in his pit his oracle pit—used me as his passive instrument—raped my body and soul possessed me with his frightful spirit his delirium his so-called inspiration filled me with his hot breath his alien fire and my body with his lusting fertilising ray so that I had to bear this witless son who is a mockery of man—of reason and of man—a mockery of me who had to bear him Who chose me to be his sacrifice to be possessed by him to foam at the mouth for god and to bring forth an idiot Who has exploited me all my life who stole from me all true happiness all human happiness who bereft me of all that others may enjoy—all that gives them security and peace Who took from me my love my beloved all all—and gave me nothing in return nothing but himself Himself Who is in me still filling me with his presence his unrest never giving me peace because he himself is not peace never forsaking me Never forsaking me!

I shake my fist at him—my impotent fist!

She trembled seemingly in a violent tumult of mind She stirred the fire and finding that it had gone out tossed the half-charred branch into the smoking embers

Yet soon she grew a little calmer and controlled

herself And when presently she continued her voice had regained its natural tone

I don t know why I m telling you all this—you a stranger But who is not a stranger to this house?

You asked me something and when I began to remember my life—my whole destiny rose up before me and I was filled with what I remembered And when did I last speak to anyone? When? It s so long ago that I cannot say

I have sat here alone brooding over my fate There has been time enough for that—too much But never anyone to tell

Yes my life since I left the world of men—and I never really belonged to it—has been loneliness I have lived alone here with this child this son with this grey haired man not knowing even now who he is or whence he came We have lived alone together up here in the mountains in this ruinous hovel which I set in order for us I know not how long ago Our only company has been the goats which stay by us wild goats which have always sought us out wherever we have dwelt and which help us to sustain life They are the only creatures he knows and cares for But he has always been attracted to the goats and they to him they follow him wherever he goes and rub against him one can hardly part them.

I think of this when I wonder who he is And I reflect that his face is unstirred by all that people call

life—that it has remained the face of a child—a grey-haired child now—with the same unchanging childish smile The vacant smile that has so tormented and tortured me and made me feel that I m living here with an idiot But sometimes I ve wondered whether perhaps it is a god sitting here beside me with his perpetual smile sitting here looking down at his temple his Delphi and the whole world of men—just smiling at it all

I don t know I know nothing But sometimes I have thought so Sometimes this idea too has crossed my mind

She ceased and for a time sat silent Then she rose and went towards the entrance out towards the night where a faint light was appearing

Suddenly she stopped and uttered a cry

He s not here! He s not here!

It was true He was no longer there He had vanished

At some moment during her long story he must have vanished into the night It was easy to do so unobserved dark as it was in there and the doorway had no door

She became quite frantic Her face could not be discerned but from her voice the man knew how distraught it must be

Where is he? Where is he? she cried Where can he have gone?

Why has he gone out into the night into the darkness where he can t look after himself—he ll be killed!

He ll fall over the cliff! Why has he done this? Why? Why? Why has he left me?

Suppose—suppose he understood the bad things I said about him—the horrible things I   Suppose he understood! But it s not possible   He s never shown any sign of understanding human speech and never been able to say anything in it But   perhaps it was just that he never wanted to? Never wanted to have anything to do with such creatures as men are Sometimes I ve almost   yes sometimes I ve wondered whether perhaps he did understand what I said to him in anger when I was hasty and unreasonable with him   my poor child   my child Ah I was many times and I was unjust unjust   How *could* I   How *could* I say such things   hurt him so   so that he had to leave me Leave me!

She was talking to herself not to the stranger although she turned to him eagerly meanwhile

He must have understood and that s why   Ah what have I done what have I done!

We must go out and search for him she exclaimed suddenly despairingly and stooping she passed through the low entrance and disappeared

He followed her

It was a moonlight night and bright with stars but a light mist of cold lay over the mountains and one could not see far

She glanced quickly round to make sure that her son

was nowhere near the house and then set off at once along a track—it might have been a track though it was difficult to distinguish—leading uphill into the mountains She walked so swiftly that he could hardly keep up being unaccustomed to such terrain It seemed incredible that one of her age could move so rapidly But she had lived the greater part of her life in these hills and was one with them With her old feet swathed in almost worn-out goatskin she glided along the *mountainside almost without effort as if she belonged* to it like a grey animal nearly impossible to make out in the misty moonlight She walked like the wild animals of the region He followed her marvelling at what she had told him of herself and of this son whom they were seeking up here among the mists God s son?

It was certainly an animal track that they were following and not one used by men Theirs ran somewhere lower down though it was hidden by the haze Why she chose this particular path he did not know but supposed that for some reason she believed her son must have passed this way She could be sure he had not gone down towards Delphi for he could never have been there in his life Had she spied some foot print? Perhaps since she took this way so determinedly

It was a gentle climb at first but later it became very steep They came right in among the hills and the path —invisible to him—sloped ever more sharply upward But once they had reached more level ground—

perhaps a plateau—she halted The invisible track must fork here or she must have lost the trail for she stopped and hesitated gazing out over the bare mountain landscape The moonlight filtered through the thin cold mist and made everything look strange it seemed to him that one might have doubts about anything and everything in this half real world But soon she went on again and now seemed certain of her way He had the queer impression that although she was a woman she moved instinctively like the beasts or was perhaps guided by some other sense not possessed by ordinary mortals They continued further and further into unreality The ground began rising again

All at once the mist lifted and in the sharp moonlight they saw before them a mighty peak covered with everlasting snow white and dark and mysterious under the sparkling stars A slow climb led them up to the edge of the snow into which a narrow but distinct track wound and disappeared Whither it led one could not tell it merely ceased vanished It was odd the way this path vanished beneath the eternal snows The old woman began to make her way along it

After a little while she stooped and picked up something from the ground It was a goatskin girdle She examined it eagerly and then lowered the hand that held it drawing a deep breath She went on. Soon afterwards she found a kilt also of goatskin discarded beside the path This too she picked up and laid over

her arm without a word Further up she found a sandal and not long afterwards another simply made from a piece of hide and a thong It lay quite near the edge of the snow They stopped there and looked up at the mysterious mountain

A thin layer of fresh snow had fallen during the night and on it they saw the clear print of a naked foot in a line with the path As they continued upward they found one footprint after another—someone had walked barefoot up towards the eternal snows They were the light distinct tracks of quite a small delicate foot becoming fainter and fainter until at last they were no more than a hint an almost imperceptible touch upon the snow Then they ceased altogether No trail led back

The old woman stood and looked at these vanishing traces of a foot that had ceased to touch the ground—of a being who had lost all weight and had risen into space which here on the mountain of god was so clear that it seemed one could touch its stars

He has gone back she murmured softly to herself It is as I thought

He used to come up here when he did leave our hut she added It was this place that drew him Now he has thrown off the garments in which he hid his earthly husk and become again what he really was The father has fetched him home

She was silent and what stirred in her what she

entrance of a ruinous goat-hut and look out over the world and the breed of men and their many inventions and his own magnificent temple and laugh at it all

Suddenly he knew of what that perpetual smile reminded him It was the image of a god which he had seen yesterday down in the temple at Delphi an ancient image standing somewhat apart as if to make room for newer finer images It had the same smile enigmatic and remote at once meaningless and inscrutable A smile neither good nor evil yet for that very reason frightening It represented the same god as did the other images no doubt—her god and the temple's—but it was evidently very old and so was the riddle of its stone smile

Yes god was incomprehensible cruel and frightening She too had found him so—this sibyl who had known him as no one else had known him who had been possessed by him loved and cursed by him who had lived her whole life for him and had even borne him a son A son who must have come into the world just to show that meaninglessness too is divine Or to be revenged upon her because she loved the one-armed man—because she rested one summer upon his single arm. Because she had experienced something other than god. Another love than the love of god.

Yes god is evil She was right in that Heartless and malignant. Revengeful towards anyone who dares to love another than him Towards him who dares forbid

him to lean his head against his house Cruel and merciless He cares nothing for mankind only for himself And he never forgets—no [illegible]

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But neither do I care for anyone but myself And I hate him as he hates me If he has cursed me then I curse him too

I will not bow And I am immortal as he is! He himself made me so—though from malice and not for my enjoyment It is a part of his curse the cruellest part of it I am immortal! Though my immortality is not like his

He reigns in the highest he is ascended into eternal youth in his heaven after hanging on a cross for a few hours while I must be tormented for ever here on earth I must wander here unblessed in my soul pursued by the unrest with which he has filled me and never finding peace Doomed to live on in this world which he left long ago and to possess no other And to look about me day after day year after year for centuries and tens of centuries with these old eyes that see through everything and perceive the vanity of all things In a world covered with ashes It is for this that he has chosen me condemned me But I will not bow And my hatred is as immortal as his!

Thus he reflected distraught by his destiny as he followed the old woman s grey figure moving on ahead

They had to cover the last part of the way by the

light of the stars alone but it was this part that she knew best. The mist had gone When they reached the hut the first dawnlight of the new day was appearing and they sat down on the clumsy stone bench outside they did not go in. There was no sunshine anywhere in that landscape but a faint brightness showed that it would come

He was still in his stormy mood and suddenly he broke out heatedly as if he were in the middle of a fierce dispute with her

How you must hate this god who has treated you so and done these things to you! How you must hate a being so full of insensate evil as he is!

The old woman did not answer at once and seemed to be reflecting Then she said

I don t know who he is How then can I hate him? Or love him? I believe I neither hate him nor love him

When I think about it it seems to me that such words have no meaning when applied to him. He is not as we are and we can never understand him He is incomprehensible inscrutable He is god

And so far as I comprehend it he is both evil and good both light and darkness both meaningless and full of a meaning which we can never perceive yet never cease to puzzle over A riddle which is intended not to be solved but to exist. To exist for us always To trouble us always

The most incomprehensible thing about him is that

he can also be a little turf altar where we may lay a few ears of corn and so be at ease and at peace He may be a spring where we can mirror our faces and drink sweet fresh water from our hands He can be that too I know Though he was not that for me—I think he could not be

For me he has been a wild chasm which engulfed me and all that I held dear A glowing breath and an embrace without safety without peace but for which I longed nevertheless A hot an alien power which ruled my ways

He has made me very unhappy But he has also allowed me to know a happiness passing all understanding He has and I must not forget it

What would my life have been without him? If I had never been filled with him with his spirit? If I had never felt the bliss that poured from him the anguish and pain that is his also and the wonder of being annihilated in his blazing arms of being altogether his? Of feeling his rapture his boundless bliss and sharing god s infinite happiness in being alive?

What would I have been without that? If I had never experienced anything but myself?

Yet I cannot forget all the evil he has done me and the horror How he took possession of my whole life and took from me almost every earthly joy How he opened his abysses to me his evil depths I don t forget that and I don t forgive!

But sitting here, old and alone looking back—looking back over my life it is you my god that I think of For it is you who have been my life you who consume and burn all things like fire You who leave nothing in your wake My life is what I have lived in you The cruel bitter rich life you have given me May you be cursed and blessed!

He looked at her in silence at her dark face which seemed ravaged by fire and at her inscrutable old eyes which had seen god

His eyes too had seen god But because of that they were empty like dried-up wells like depths with nothing in them They were not like hers Why was that? Why was he so poor and she so rich?

But my fate What have you to say of that? he demanded fiercely What have you to tell me—me the man who comes to you seeking an interpretation of this tumult in his soul of the curse that lies on him? What comfort have you for *me*? The things that bring you comfort and meaning hold nothing for me

The old woman looked at him and met his gaze It was poor indeed— it was the poorest look she had seen in anyone She had noticed it when he came and noticed that his simple mantle was like a king s robe in comparison

But she saw too that he was wrong in what he said that his eyes were dried up wells depths with nothing in them. It was not so They were not empty They

were full of despair If the curse that had fallen upon him had made him destitute and taken everything from him it had at least brought him this And perhaps because she saw this she answered as she did

I can see in your face that you re under god s curse and that what you say is true It s plain that you re not free that you re bound to him and that he doesn t mean to let you go He is your destiny Your soul is filled with him through his curse you live a life with god. You hate him you mock and revile him But judging by your indignant words you care for nothing in the world but him and are filled with him alone With what you call your hatred of him. But this very red hot hatred of god is perhaps your experience of the divine

Perhaps one day he will bless you instead of cursing you I don t know Perhaps one day you will let him lean his head against your house Perhaps you won t I know nothing about that But whatever you may do your fate will be for ever bound up with god your soul for ever filled with god

You want me to look into the future I can t do that But I know enough of the life of mankind and can glimpse enough of the road that lies before them to know that they can never escape the curse and the blessing that comes to them from god Whatever they may think and do whatever they may believe or disbelieve their destiny will always be bound up with god.